

hack//

Another Birth

vol.3//OUTBREAK_

Story by
Miu Kawasaki

Supervised by
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Illustrated by
CyberConnect2



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Character Files

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Kite

A Twin Blade with the ability to rewrite data; he is trying to help his friend Orca, who also fell into a coma. He teams up with BlackRose.



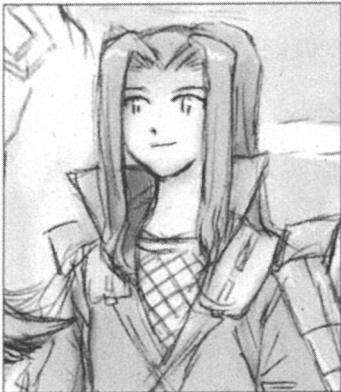
BlackRose

A Heavy Blade role-played by Akira Hayami. She only enters The World to determine why her little brother, Fumikazu, fell into a coma.



Chimney

A friendly Blademaster and Nova's partner. His goal is to spring all traps.



Nova

A Heavy Blade partnered with Chimney. He teaches BlackRose the basics of The World.

Character Files



Mia

A catlike avatar who shouldn't exist. She takes an interest in Kite's bracelet and gives Akira information. She is often seen with Elk, a Wavemaster.



Balmuna

Known as one of the "Descendants of Fianna," he completed the The One Sin event along with Orca. He's also trying to find information about Orca's coma and believes Kite might be the cause.



Natsume

A Twin Blade who runs into Kite. She doesn't understand how dangerous this adventure is.



Mistral

A highly inquisitive Wavemaster who likes to collect unusual items. Though she often seems impulsive, she is actually quite level-headed.

After the Network Crisis

I clicked the remote again and again, channel surfing for any kind of news. One station showed a live helicopter feed of a fire that engulfed a large section of the Kawasaki industrial park. On another station newscasters were talking about the power outage that had knocked out traffic signals, resulting in a flurry of traffic accidents. Even though it had been several hours since the beginning of the Minato Mirai emergency, no TV channel was telling me—us—what we wanted to know.

Are the people there all right?

The next channel I tried was showing its regular programming, but with a scrolling news update ticker along the bottom of the screen. "Temporary shutdown of all bus and rail transportation in Minato Mirai," it read.

I still hadn't seen any concrete report on the state of the damage, and my mind had only grown more impatient and uneasy as time passed. Turning from the screen for the moment, I looked back

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at my mother, who was still trying to get through on the land line. Between dialing attempts and the inevitable busy signals that were all she got for her trouble, she fretted over the deluge of sketchy reports every television channel was more than happy to dish out.

Frustrated, I set the remote on the floor and leaned back on the sofa. As vague as the information we were getting from broadcast TV and radio was, they were the only reliable source we had. The land line phone wasn't working well—circuits were scrambled, so it was hard to get through, and anytime Mom actually got through to someone, the connection dropped after just seconds. As for my cell phone, when I'd tried it a couple hours before, I hadn't been able to get a signal.

Our Internet connection was working all right, but the news sites had become a breeding ground for rumors—that international cyber terrorism had caused this crisis, or that there were urban guerillas . . . it was impossible to judge what was true and what was just speculation.

I wonder if Dad's okay . . .

Next to me my little brother Kouta looked worriedly back and forth from me and Mom to the TV. "It's all right," I said, smiling and squeezing his hand. He gave a half-smile in response, as if he wasn't quite sure whether to believe me.

I stood up and walked up the stairs to my room to try my cell phone again. I'd left it there after giving up the time before, and it was cool to the touch when I picked it up.

Glancing out the window, I saw that the sky was beginning to darken. Far off in the distance I heard faint sirens start up, sending a

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chill down my spine. I went back to the living room and, seeing that my phone was getting a signal, dialed Miho's number. I remembered hearing that she had a lot of friends who hung out in Minato Mirai, and I thought she might be able to give me some idea what was going on there. But that faint hope soon faded—I couldn't get through to her. Not even voicemail was working.

I just hope he hasn't gotten caught up in it . . .

We hadn't had any word from or news of Dad, and with only rumors to go by, all we could do as a family was wait and hope for the best.

The sun set, and the curtain of night fell. As time wore on, a few more details started trickling out to the news stations. A provisional clinic had apparently been set up in front of Sakuragicho Station in the Minato Mirai district. Every hospital in the area was reportedly overflowing with the injured.

The hour grew later and later, and the ticking of the wall clock was getting painfully louder. My cell phone still would not connect. Whatever had happened in Minato Mirai, I wanted to be able to think that Dad was all right. I ached for some kind of indication that he hadn't been involved at all. *I don't care who, but somebody please tell me he's all right!*

As I sat there worrying in front of the TV, Mom sat down beside me. "I managed to get through to one of the other teachers at his school," she said. "He promised he'd contact me if he found anything out. All we can do now is wait."

I nodded. "Yeah."

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Conked out along the top of the sofa, Kouta suddenly stirred with a twitch . . . and in that instant, a new sound shrilly drowned out the constant murmur of the television—the ring of the telephone. The incoming call display flashed on the wall phone. Mom jumped up and snatched the receiver from its cradle.

“Honey! You’re all right?” she cried. I didn’t have to guess who it was on the other end.

He’s all right! I thought, sighing in relief.

The call was brief, but a scant few dozen minutes later, Dad walked through the front door, unharmed. He smiled and sat down on his chair in the living room, and started telling the tale of his day’s adventures like it was some heroic war story.

“It was like watching the return of Pluto’s Kiss,” he said, his eyes wide.

Pluto’s Kiss—the network crisis that had occurred on Christmas Eve, 2005. They taught us in school that it was a cyber crime that had shut the Internet down completely for seventy-seven minutes, throwing the entire world into chaos. I was in fifth grade at the time, and I was shocked when I found out that the culprit who had perpetrated Pluto’s Kiss was a grade schooler just like me.

“The crime-prevention shutters started coming down,” Dad continued, “and Mister Ishikawa and I saw someone about to get trapped under one of them, so we dragged him to safety just in time.”

“Don’t those shutters weigh hundreds of kilograms?” Mom said. “And you dragged someone out from under one? Was he okay?”

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"Well, we got him out just in time, so he wasn't crushed or anything," Dad said. "He'd fallen and sprained his ankle though, so we carried him outside."

"Oh my!" Mom exaggeratedly raised her eyebrows. "Was he a very light person?"

"I *am* a gym teacher, you know," Dad said, flexing his arms as if we needed reminding how strong he was. "Even if he'd been heavy, I could have carried him all by myself—running! Anyway, after we escaped from Queen's Square, we found out all the public transit lines were shut down, but since I was with Mister Ishikawa—"

"Did he give you a ride home?"

"His wife came to pick us up."

"Oh, I should have gone there after all . . ." Mom murmured, but Dad hurriedly shook his head.

"There was no reason to throw yourself in harm's way just to pick someone up who was alive and well," he said. "You would've just gotten caught up in the mess. Not coming was the right call."

"I would've gone if Akira hadn't stopped me," Mom said, puffing her cheeks and pouring Dad a beer. I chimed in a confirmation, but Dad didn't seem to care.

"Speaking of people who came to pick other people up," he said, tilting his head, "there was this man maybe about my age wearing a Hawaiian shirt in this cold weather who showed up in front of Sakuragicho Station on a bicycle! That's something I won't soon forget." He smiled. Accepting the beer from Mom, he took a sip.

"What're you smiling about?" I asked him, curious.

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He took a few more sips, then said, "His daughter was with him, and both of them were talking on their cell phones at the same time . . . It was just a strange juxtaposition of images."

"Wasn't the father probably talking with his family, and the daughter with her boyfriend?" I said. "I mean, with all the phone lines tied up, they'd want to talk as much as they could before the connections gave out."

"That could be," Dad mused. But he was apparently done being serious for the night, because his next comment was, "Still, it's another strange thing entirely to hear the word 'boyfriend' come out of your mouth. I guess you *are* getting to be that age!" Downing the rest of the glass, he grinned at me. "Have you got one yet, Akira?"

When he said that, Hagiya's face sprang unbidden to my mind. I could tell my own face was turning a bright red, and I hurriedly shook my head. "No way!"

Before he could get another jibe in, I fled back up to my room. Then I sat down in front of my computer and took a deep breath.

The moment that the network-wide disorder had begun . . . and the moment when things went wrong in The World right after Kite, Mistral, and I defeated Magus—the timing matched up too perfectly. The instant Magus was defeated, Net Slum had collapsed. Carmina Gadelica was contaminated as well. By the time I logged out, the entire network had gone wonky.

Out here, and inside the game—what caused it all? I shook off my doubts and tried a different train of thought. *There's no way the game could have caused all this. Network trouble obviously has to have some cause rooted in the real world.*



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Still, my heart felt like lead. There was some small part of me that just couldn't definitively say that the game wasn't responsible. *It was after we defeated Magus that the 'net lost connectivity.* I already knew that the game was the reason my brother Fumikazu had fallen into a coma. *If our actions in the game have somehow resulted in all this turmoil in the real world, does that mean we're doing something terrible?*

The seed of that doubt sprouted into anxiety, and I started to suspect that we would soon regret everything we'd done up to this point. With clammy fingers, I started up the computer. I wanted to talk to Kite right away. I wanted him to tell me that what we were doing was *right*.

"Sure enough, no good," I muttered. My computer connected to the 'net just fine, but it wouldn't interface with The World.

Leaving the computer on the connection screen, I sat down on my bed. The day had just been too full—too many things had happened to fully absorb them all. Just then, the fatigue hit me like running into a brick wall.

Looking at Fumikazu's face in the family photo standing next to the computer, I told him, *I've come this far. Tomorrow, and the next day, and the next, I'll keep going and going until you're back home safe like Dad.* My eyelids drooped.



On the way to school the next day, the hot topic was the previous day's crisis in Minato Mirai. Even while riding my bike, whenever I

passed people I couldn't help but hear them talking about it. And when I arrived and stood outside my classroom, I could hear it already overflowing with the same chatter.

No one had figured out yet what had caused it all. Perhaps for that reason alone the rumors flying around the 'net had risen to new dramatic heights.

Miho tapped me energetically on the shoulder as I stood in the classroom doorway. "Good morning, Akira! Hey, you weren't there yesterday, were you?" She urged me into the classroom as I shook my head. "Good thing I didn't go hang out in Minato Mirai like usual," she said. "Yesterday I was gaming with Shouko instead." As we walked toward our desks, she looked over in Shouko's direction. "That stuff all started right after the game crashed, you know? There are all sorts of rumors, and it's like they've gone *beyond* rumors at this point."

The anxiety that had been vaguely floating in the back of my mind started to gradually take shape again. "You're sure the game crashed beforehand?" I said.

"Totally! And that virus that's spread through The World . . . what the heck's up with that?" Miho kept blathering on like it was the juiciest gossip ever, and Shouko frowned at her.

I have to get them to stop playing, and quick! I thought, warning klaxons going off in my head.

I must've looked like I was deep in thought, because Shouko peered at me. "Akira, are you okay?" she asked. "You look pale."

"Huh? Oh, yeah, uh . . . I just didn't get much sleep," I said.

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Miho drifted away from us and started talking to one of our other classmates. Shouko's eyes followed her, and for some reason her expression was troubled.



When I got home, I immediately checked my e-mail. Nothing from Miho or Shouko, who had both been logged in at the time. Was everyone else all right, though? Chimney, Nova, Natsume—were they all as unaffected?

I was worried about them, so sent out a message. I didn't want to alarm anyone even more though, so I made it sound casual—but not even Chimney, who usually responded immediately, e-mailed me back.

What gives?

Tired of waiting to hear from them, I opened the BBS. It was overflowing with posts relating to the disturbance in the game, the *Epitaph of Twilight*, and Data Bug sightings. Then my eyes halted on one thread.

. . . Sieg, what's up? I haven't seen you in a while, and you haven't responded to my e-mails . . .

"Sieg . . ." *He's the helpful player character Fumikazu wrote about in his journal!*

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Both Alf and Sieg . . . had they been caught up in this like Fumikazu was? *Maybe they saw the danger signs for what they were and quit playing right away.*

My computer made the "new mail" sound, so I switched back to see what it was . . . An e-mail from CC Corporation offering the opinion that the hacker Helba was responsible for the recent problems in the game.

"That's a lie!" I said out loud. *That rotten, pigheaded . . . No matter what he thinks of her personally, he should know Helba wouldn't do something like this! Is CC Corp just trying to cast off the blame?*

The e-mail headers indicated it had been sent to all users of The World, so that meant Kite had gotten it too. *What will he think about this?*

I returned to the e-mail I had contemplated sending Kite the day before.

. . . There's lots of things I don't understand, but I'm sure it'll all work out! No one's been responding to my messages, but in spite of it all I seem to have come through this all right so far. Please contact me anytime.

Once the message was confirmed sent, I logged into The World. For the moment, my disgust at Lios' ignorance outweighed my anxiety.



The instant I warped into Carmina Gadelica, I spotted Kite. He didn't notice me, but trudged dejectedly along, his shoulders slumped. I'd never seen him like that before! No matter what situation he was in, he'd always moved nimbly and confidently. He'd always used the dangerous power of the bracelet with what seemed to me a righteous assurance, but now the same Kite who'd taken the lead with such conviction before looked completely discouraged.

What'll I do if even I lose heart? I thought. *But I at least need to hear what he has to say.*

"Hey!" I called out to him, trying to make my voice sound as cheerful as always. "I just sent you an e-mail. Did you get it?"

Kite slowly glanced in my direction. "No, not yet," he said.

"Oh, okay," I said, keeping up the act as I approached him. "Well, it wasn't really anything important."

"Hey . . ." he said in a worried tone, his eyes downcast.

"Hmm?" I replied, trying to sound casual.

"I just don't know anymore . . ." His eyes briefly rose to meet mine, but then glanced away again. "I just don't know if what we're doing is the right thing to do." Staring into the middle distance, Kite suddenly looked very frail.

"Are you kidding me?" I burst out. "It's sorta late to change your mind *now*."

"Yeah, but . . ."

The timid way he was speaking, how he'd avert his eyes and fall silent—reminded me of how Fumikazu had acted when he was little, and my heart ached. Like I would've done with my little brother back then, I peered into his face. "You know, you can tell me," I said. "I'm here to listen. So spit it out already."

Normally whenever I acted tough like that Kite would smile. I almost dared hope for the same response now. But Kite just looked away and said, "I'm starting to realize that every time we jump into action, something awful happens. Maybe Balmung is right."

"We can't be sure of that!" I protested. "We can't tell for sure yet if what we've done is good or bad." *We've only gotten this far because we think what we're doing is good and right. We have to take responsibility for our actions, but we can't stop now just because the going's getting tough!*

"Umm," Kite said, "but . . ."

"Argh! Will you cut it out?" I threw up my hands. "This is stupid and really ticking me off!"

Kite looked up at me.

"Just stop for a moment and think again about *why* we risk our lives doing all these dangerous and terrifying things in the first place!" I said. "Standing around moping and whining isn't going to help!"

I caught myself and stomped away, frustrated. *Ugh, this is the worst . . . I should just log out.* I'd never intended to get into a fight with Kite. All I wanted to do was encourage him. *Why did it turn out like this?* Our signals just kept getting crossed. Kite was the one person I didn't want to see lose his way.

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After I logged out, I was immediately filled with regret about what had happened. I hadn't been at all open with Kite. I hadn't told him a single thing.

Despite my reluctance to share my own feelings with him, I'd told him off. Even though I was the one person in the world who should have understood the weight he felt pressing down on his shoulders, I shouted at him. Why? Because I was only thinking about my own selfish concerns. But Kite was as human as I was—no doubt he had his own worries as well.

"I've got no right to shout at him," I told the computer screen in front of me. But it only stared back, and I couldn't bring myself to log back in.

I rushed from my room toward the front door. I was dressed in a sweat jacket and pants, so I slipped on a pair of broken-in sneakers and dashed outside. The sun was dipping toward the horizon, but there were hours yet left in the day.

I ran.

I ran down the road I used to jog along with Fumikazu at my side.

What should I say to Kite?

Even though I'd had plenty of opportunities, I'd never been able to bring myself to be totally honest with him. I hadn't had the courage to tell him my whole story. I was that afraid of him, or anyone, thinking poorly of me.

The cold air buffeted my face and hair. The more I ran, the louder I breathed and the harder my heart pumped in my chest, the clearer my head grew.

Kite's expression had been uneasy. Had he really been confident in all his actions up until now? Had his confidence been wiped out by the recent upheaval?

No . . . Even Kite has just been groping his way forward, I thought. Whether or not he always did the right thing at the time, he must have been doing what he could—doing all he could.

Though we both had our own motivations, we had started our journeys at almost exactly the same time. The same wall of doubt that I had slammed up against must have loomed before Kite as well. If I couldn't be there to say I understood how he felt, who else could? *Our goal is the same. Kite is my companion—if we can't see this through to the end together, how can we ever get there?*

I'll go back! I decided. *I'll go back and tell him everything.*

He was my companion, so there was nothing to fear. *I was able to tell Mistral everything, so why do I have such a hard time telling Kite?*



By the time I made it back home, the sun was closer to the horizon and the whir of the hard disk in my darkened room sounded lonesome. I flicked on the light as well as my heating fan, giving my cold ears and fingers a chance to warm up.

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As I sat down at the desk, I noticed the mail indicator flashing. The message was from Mistral.

Hello! ☆ How're you doins? Looks like some scary stuff happened in Yokohama—are you all right? Or maybe I worry too much. (^_^) Actually, there's something I want to talk to you about. I told Kite in-game, but I think that with you it's best we meet in person to discuss it. I live in Omiya, so I don't think meeting up should be too difficult. If you take the Shonan Liner, it's only about an hour away. It's direct to Yokohama, so . . . is it okay if we meet? In any case, I'll give you my real world contact info. ♪ If you could contact me at this new address from now on, that'd be a lifesaver. ◡_◡

The message had just recently arrived. I looked up at the wall clock—Mistral's e-mails usually arrived earlier or much later than this. I didn't know what to think about a message from her at this time of day . . . and usually she'd refer to me as BlackRose or “troubled high school girl.” But not this time.

She all of a sudden wants to meet me . . .

What the heck must've happened?

I figured giving Mistral my contact info would be no problem. I'd already been wanting to meet her sometime to talk with her and thank her for supporting me. But at a time like this?

If I replied now, would she respond quickly? I also had a lot of things I wanted to talk to her about. My fight with Kite, but also how I thought this might be my chance to finally tell him everything . . . and about how my father got caught up in the mess in Minato Mirai . . .

This e-mail, I suddenly realized, reads like Mistral's not going to be coming back to The World.

I did want to see her, but would now, while so much was going on, be the best time? What I really wanted to do was wait until things had calmed down a bit . . . but after fretting for a little while, I sent her my cell phone number and cell e-mail address.



The church was as I remembered it. It was the second time I'd been there, and this time I dared to come alone instead of with Kite. But I hoped to see him there soon—I'd sent him an e-mail asking to meet, and I didn't hesitate to suggest we rendezvous in the first field we'd gone to when we started adventuring together. The place where Fumikazu was attacked, the place where Kite first used that bracelet of his—standing there all alone, I felt it was a somehow melancholy, yet tranquil, place.

I'm all right, I thought, looking up at the statue of Aura, staring as she was into the distance. I can still go through with this.

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Footsteps approached from behind me. I turned slowly around to see the friendly face I'd expected. Kite looked at me worriedly.

I drew in a heavy breath. *I'm not wimping out this time.* I wanted to focus my will and finally tell him.

I didn't want any more distractions, so I'd set the face-mount display goggles to first-person view.

Returning my gaze to the Aura statue, I slowly spoke up. "There's something I want you to know. My brother . . . fell unconscious here."

The only response was a shocked silence.

"I never told you," I said, drawing in another deep breath, "because I never found the right time. I'm sorry."

Another silence followed, so I plowed on. "Remember the first time I met you, when I forced you to come here?"

"Yeah . . ."

"Well," I said, "I wanted to see what had happened here with my own eyes. But I was too frightened to come here by myself . . ." So *I invited you. It's not like I could have come with just anyone . . . but with you, I was able to . . .* I swallowed. "I still feel that way. I'm very, very scared, but . . ."

I turned back toward Kite. *Come on, I urged myself. You've already decided to come out and tell him!* I stared fixedly at his eyes. "I wouldn't have gotten this far without you," I let out. "So what am I going to do if even you start . . . doubting yourself?"

Kite didn't open his mouth, but he held my gaze.

"How am I supposed to cope?" I croaked. "Does a big sister *have* to be happy and strong all the time? I want . . . I want to—" My last words quavered, and everything I had stored up inside for so long started spilling over. My view of the FMD distorted.

Don't cry! I chided myself, but the tears slid down my cheeks. Even though there was no way Kite could see them, I turned my face away from him so he wouldn't know, but somehow he figured it out anyway.

"BlackRose," he said, "please don't cry."

I was causing him to worry again. *Get a grip!* "Wh-whattaya mean? I'm n-not crying! You can't even see my face, so don't go making assumptions."

Just like the time we'd first met in Mac•Anu, I talked on and on and Kite just stood there dumbly. He let out a long sigh.

"There you go again!" I said. "How typical!" I made BlackRose smile and turned to look back at Kite. "You always clam up when you should be talking!"

Kite looked up at me, and when he spoke, it was apologetically. "Yeah. I'm sorry . . . I was wrong to think that I was the only one trying to do something about Orca and this disaster. I'm not. Now I know . . ."—Kite looked up into space—"I'm not the only one. We all want to bring this horrible mess to a close."

"Yeah." *You're not alone. I'm sorry for dumping everything on your shoulders before now.* But I didn't say it.

"Now what can we do about this situation?" Kite asked, then answered his own question. "It's simple—we've got to do what we think is right. That's the only way we can move forward."

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"Yeah, and we'll do it together!" I said. "My intuition says things'll work out—and my intuition is pretty good!"

Kite grinned. He was back to his usual self. And though I had supposedly now taken some of his burden onto my own shoulders, my mood had lightened. I had told him the truth. The sensation was somehow awkward yet freeing at the same time.

The sun hasn't quite set. There's still a chance for me to go and tell Fumikazu . . .

"Well," I said, "I'm off to go see my brother."

"At the hospital?" Kite said.

"Yeah. And . . . thanks."

"Thank you . . . to you too." Kite smiled.

I smiled back, then turned and put the church behind me.



The next day, I entered The World more cheerfully than I'd felt in a long time, but I couldn't get in contact with Kite.

Maybe he's not logged in?

The mail indicator flashed. *Kite?* I thought, but the sender was CC Corporation. The message said that Sigma server had opened up.

"I've got nothing else to do," I mused. "Might as well go."

I headed for the Σ server root town. Fort Ouph was an aerial city, but that wasn't what rendered me speechless as soon as I warped in. The e-mail had mentioned that there were some "unsightly" spots, but what an understatement! The blue sky was riddled with



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fissures through which I glimpsed a progression of luminescent blue characters. And the town's shops and stone bridges were spotted with flaming red patches. Even the most oblivious person could immediately tell that this place was infected by the virus.

What the heck is Lios thinking?

Pretending to ignore the contaminated spots and the worried faces of the player characters around me, I started to stroll through town.

The sensation of height I'd experienced in Highland City Dun Loireag paled in comparison to that of this root town, which was a collection of flying islands fastened together by firm, stone bridges. Instead of looking down, I tried to focus on the few stubby, round trees that stuck out from between the clustered buildings, giving a slight illusion of terra firma. On the island furthest from the Chaos Gate I saw the familiar sign of a grunty ranch, and though I had no intention of raising another one, I found myself heading dizzily in that direction. As I got closer, a familiar red hat came into view.

"Kite!" I cried out.

Kite smiled bashfully, waved to a grunty, and turned toward me.

"What're you doing?" The words slipped from my mouth just as I realized it was a stupid question.

"Feeding a grunty," Kite said. "What about you, BlackRose?"

Yeah. Dumb question. But I said, "I got the e-mail from CC about this town opening, so I logged in."

"Gotcha."

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We wandered around the town aimlessly and wordlessly. When we reached somewhere that looked a bit off the beaten path and less likely to attract passersby, Kite suddenly stopped.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Yesterday,” Kite said, “I went to an area someone wrote about on the BBS.”

“Alone?”

“Yeah. Since you were going to the hospital.”

I hadn’t noticed the BBS post Kite described to me. It mentioned an area with a strange room, somewhere Orca had supposedly gone, and what was supposed to be found there.

“So, was it there?” I asked.

“The room?”

“Yeah, that, or any more *Epitaph* fragments.”

“Both,” Kite said, “and I also found an item called ‘Harald’s Note.’”

“Harald?” I said, musing. “Oh yeah—didn’t the old man in Net Slum mention his name?”

Kite nodded.

I felt a nagging feeling, like I’d overlooked something . . . *That’s it!* Harald Hoerwick—he was the programmer who had made this game and based it on the *Epitaph of Twilight*. I seemed to remember it saying on the BBS that he had disappeared or committed suicide or something. “What kind of note?” I asked.

“Umm . . .” Kite paused, perhaps checking the item he’d received, then started speaking.

.hack // Another Birth

"Humans have physical limits.
But the AI has no limits to growth.
I want to know where it will lead.
I want to see what lies there.

"The ultimate AI makes mistakes just like humans.
There is no growth without error.
The difference is not to repeat the same mistake.
Harald, this is a critical time.

"Earth is the womb of life and death,
so the mother is the goddess
of both life and death.

"Thus maternity has two sides: life and death.
So was her manifestation a necessity?
Morganna Mode Gone—
She rejects my intervention."

Ultimate AI? I thought. What does that mean?

"I heard bits of that as I went further and further underground,"
Kite said.

I wracked my brain to find any part of the *Epitaph of Twilight* we'd found so far that might bear some relation, but nothing seemed to fit. "So," I said, "what about the new *Epitaph* fragment?"

Kite obliged.

"The whole cannot be changed.
We have already lost that chance.
Because the time left to us was short,
We were mistaken in our path.
But now do we realize,
We should change not the whole,
But the parts."

Okay, so they're trying to accomplish something. But what? Is this talking about the AI's growth process? "I understand the difference between the whole and the parts," I murmured, "but doesn't changing one change the other?"

Kite inclined his head inquisitively, not getting it.

"The 'whole' must be how things are connected together," I said, "like a family tree or direct line of descent. So a 'part' would be like one individual."

"I . . . guess so," Kite said.

"All this is about changing . . ." I shook my head. "Somehow this one feels different from the other parts of the *Epitaph* we've seen."

"Yeah." Kite nodded. "Everything before this one seemed like a story."

Pondering this, we returned to the Chaos Gate in silence. Standing there in front of it was someone we hadn't at all expected to see—Wiseman. *What's he doing in a place like this? Did he also come to check out the state of this town?* I put on a cheerful face. "Hi!" I cried, walking up to Wiseman.

•hack // Another Birth

He lightly raised a hand. "I knew you'd be here," he said.

"Huh?" *How?*

"I had business with you," he continued, "so I've been waiting."

I realized he was looking at Kite. "With me?" Kite said.

What could it be? I inclined my head, but Wiseman took no notice and continued speaking.

"If things are proceeding according to the *Epitaph of Twilight*, there are five more Phases of the Wave."

The longer fragment of the *Epitaph* that Wiseman had sent us sprang to my mind. "Fidchell, Gorre, Macha, Tarvos, and . . . Corbenik, was it?" I said.

Wiseman nodded gravely.

"If we defeat them, then . . . ?" Kite asked, but Wiseman shook his head.

If we defeat them, it still won't be over?

Wiseman's answer came soon enough. "No. There still remains Cubia—Cubia, 'the concealed,' as it's described in the *Epitaph*. As for its role, I am unfortunately at a loss."

Finding anything out about Cubia would be difficult indeed if even the erudite Wiseman knew nothing.

"I wonder what Harald intended to do with a world designed around the *Epitaph*," Kite said, tilting his head.

"That certainly is the question, isn't it?" Wiseman said. "Hmm—How about I give you this. Put it to good use." He passed something to Kite.

after_the_network_crisis

What? A weapon? Equipment?

Once it was in his inventory, Kite looked up at Wiseman, surprised. But all Wiseman said was, "I'll be in touch," then warped out.

"It's a virus core," Kite said, turning to look at me. "Why would Wiseman have one of those?"

"Got me," I said, looking down at the ground. When you used a virus core to go somewhere, you could be sure *something* would show up. If we used Wiseman's "gift" to get around, would we get closer to our goals? Or would things only grow worse? I lifted my head to meet Kite's eyes.

"There's no loss in having it," he said. "It'll come in handy if anything happens."

"True," I said, nodding. "We've got to be optimistic!"

He paused, then said, "Well, it's late. I've got to get going."

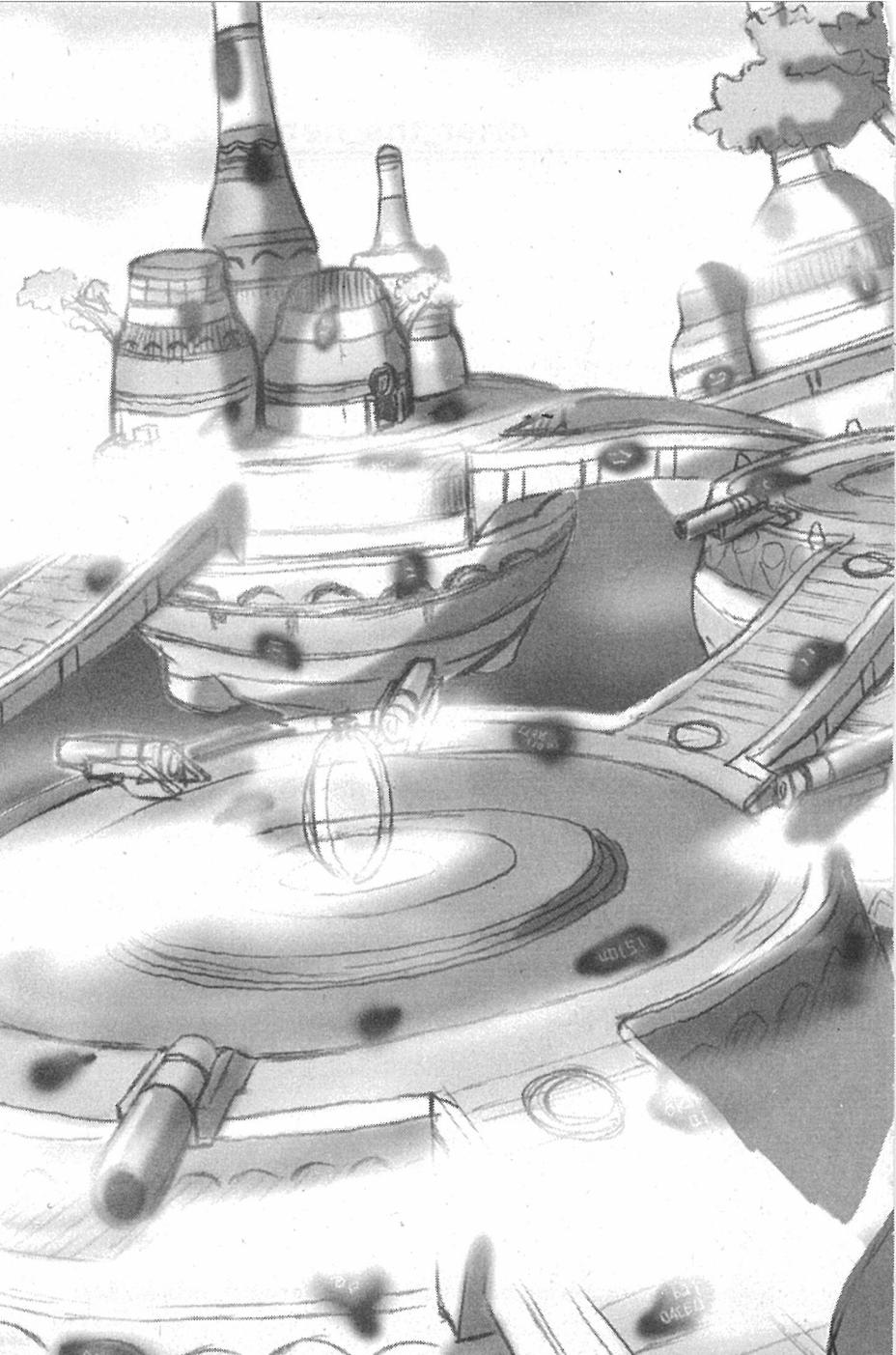
"Okay," I said. "See you."

Kite smiled at me, then warped out. I was left alone there in Fort Ouph.

That's right, I thought. We all want to do what we can to put an end to this stuff as soon as possible. Staring out at the fissure-laden sky, I raised my fist and swore I would not lose.

With a final glance at the contaminated patches, I left The World behind me.







.hack // Another Birth

"Oww!"

"Excuse us!" Shouko said, apologizing in my stead—walking next to her and not paying attention to where I was going, I'd bumped into someone.

"Sorry," I chimed in as the girl I'd jostled walked away. Shouko and I were headed toward the Tokyu Hands store near Yokohama Station to buy costume materials for the school's cultural festival.

"Akira, are you feeling all right?" Shouko maneuvered us out of the crowd and peered into my face.

"I'm fine," I said. "I was just spacing out."

Shouko's shoulders slumped. "Lately, that's *all* you've been doing." Then she looked up and pointed to a fast food joint we were about to pass. "Hey, want to take a little detour?"

"Sure."

Inside, I just ordered a drink, then went up to the eating area on the second floor. After we'd taken our seats, Shouko let out a deep breath.

"I might be acting weird," I teased, "but aren't you too, Shouko? Work got you down?"

Shouko stared down at her cup and wordlessly shook her head. Then, after a pause that was much longer than polite conversation required, she muttered, "I want to quit . . ."

I raised an eyebrow.

"The game," she said, then gave a small, desolate smile.

I nodded firmly. "Do it," I said. "Not that I believe the rumors, but . . . I do think it's dangerous."

She shifted her tray back and forth. "But what . . . what should I say to Yuuji?"

"If you just come out and tell him you're quitting, he should understand," I said. "There's more than enough weird rumors about The World flying around." It's not like I knew a lot about Yuuji, but I suspected he was the kind of guy who'd understand.

"Yeah . . ." Shouko's gaze moved toward the window and the street below. The way the sun lit one side of her face and cast shadows on the other made her look oddly mature. "But we've talked about so much in that game," she said, "made so many memories . . . it would be so awkward if I quit. And that thought makes me scared . . ."

My immediate reaction was that I couldn't relate to her sentiments, but for some reason my breath caught.

"We both work so much, we hardly have any time to really talk," Shouko said. "This might sound weird to you, but I feel like if I quit, I'll sever my best connection to him."

In the pause that followed, I must've been wearing a strange expression, because Shouko turned back and said, "Stop that! Don't you make that face too, Akira!"

I coughed and looked away. "Yeah, well . . ."

"I'll tell him," she said with a forced cheerfulness in order to break the unpleasant atmosphere that had been building. "Besides, they say there are people who've fallen into comas playing the game, and I . . ." She paused, and her face clouded. "Wait."

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And in that instant, my gaze fell. Even though my reluctance might only confirm her suspicions, there was absolutely no way I could bring myself to look Shouko in the eye.

"Fumikazu," she continued. "He played the game, didn't he?"

My mouth would not open. *I only connected the chain of events after reading Fumikazu's diary, so there's no way someone who actually met him online wouldn't be able to do the same, right?*

"He's in the hospital because . . ." Shouko said slowly. "And that's why you told me to quit?"

What should I say? How can I answer that? Shouko had already said she was going to quit, so it should have been safe to just tell her, but . . . "No waaay," I said, as cheerfully as I could. *Is my smile convincing?* "If he were in a coma—what would you do, Shouko?"

"What *could* I do?"

"A-anyway," I broke in, "the game's not the reason he's in the hospital." *A lie.* "If it *was* the game and we knew it, don't you think we'd be suing CC Corp for all they've got?" *Even if that were a real option, that wouldn't keep me from doing everything in my power to . . .* "H-hey! If we get back late, they'll know we took a detour, so let's hurry and do the shopping." Before Shouko could respond, I hurriedly stood up and turned from the table.

I didn't want to involve her. I had a feeling if we talked about it any longer, I'd end up telling her everything, and that she'd offer to help out . . . and I was afraid of where that would lead.

"Yeah, okay," Shouko said slowly.

after_the_network_crisis

As she stood up to join me, the cell phone in my skirt pocket started vibrating. I snatched it out and looked at the screen—a new e-mail was coming in. I stopped in the middle of the shop and opened the message.

Subject: This is Mistral

Hello! Once again, nice to meet you. I'm Masumi Kurokawa, AKA Mistral. This is sudden, but when should we do this? How about during the day? If we're out too late, your folks will probably get worried. So if there's a day that's good for you, please let me know. I'm a willful housewife and can go out anytime during the day, so don't worry about me!

What the heck?

"Akira, what is it?"

Shouko came up behind me, and I shoved the phone back in my pocket. "Uh . . . nothing." But as I answered her, I couldn't completely quell a strange uneasiness.

She Became Complicated •

At first I didn't think it was her. It was a day off in Yokohama's Chinatown; the entrance known as Zenrinmon was jam-packed with tourists. I spotted her waving wildly from the crowd, but it took me several seconds before I realized I was the one she was waving at. I nervously approached and greeted her.

"Miss . . . Mistral?" I said. "Nice to meet you."

"Hellooo!" she said with a soft smile, offering her hand. She was short, with long, glossy black hair piled on top of her head. A young woman of light complexion, she wore thin glasses behind which were visible a distinct set of creased eyelids. "Sorry about saying 'let's meet' all of a sudden like this . . ." she offered.

"Not at all, I apologize for making you come all this way," I said, all the while unable to take my eyes off Mistral's—Mrs. Kurokawa's—most obvious feature, her belly. *If I'd known about this, I would've been more than happy to be the one who made the long trip!*

hack // Another Birth

Before we got to this point, we'd e-mailed back and forth many times, telling as much about each other as words could express. Names, where we lived, our current life situations, why we started playing *The World*—things like that, and small talk of the kind shared by friends. But even with all that, she hadn't told me about *this*. So, not knowing whether it was an okay topic of conversation, I fell into silence.

"I'm the one who said we should meet, so no need to worry." She smiled at me apologetically, noticing my silence. "I didn't mean to keep this from you—I just wanted to tell you about it in person. As you can see, I, Mayumi Kurokawa, am having a baby!"

As she rubbed her protruding belly, I slowly looked up at her face.

"Y'know, I just started my seventh month," she said happily.

I nodded vaguely. "That's . . . nice and all, but . . . isn't it a strain to come all this way?"

"Nope!" she chirped. "Not at all! Things calm down after the fifth month, so I get around pretty well." She must've noticed my doubtful expression, so she hurriedly continued. "My husband, you see, is too busy to take me anywhere. Today was a good chance to get out, and I wanted to see Chinatown anyway as well as you! It's more fun to wander around somewhere if you have someone to do it with, don't you think? Besides, once the baby's born I won't be able to go anywhere for a while, so . . . might as well do it now!" She smiled the way Mistral always did, but she didn't have her avatar's doubled teeth.

she_became_complicated

I hadn't studied pregnancy since health class in middle school, and frankly I was lost. Was it really all right to go sightseeing in Chinatown? "Is that how it works, ma'am?"

"Grr . . . no formalities!" she protested. "That's not natural to hear from BlackRose!"

Mrs. Kurokawa's expressiveness was so lively, I got the distinct impression that I was looking at a real-life Mistral. Perhaps it showed on my face, because she inclined her head inquisitively.

"Is something odd?" she asked.

"I just . . . thought that you were acting just like Mistral."

"Just like?" She laughed. "*I'm* the real thing!"

The way she said it made me remember something Fumikazu had said long ago. " 'net game players are divided into two kinds—the type who role-play characters, and the type who play the game as they themselves are—but it's not a question of which one's best."

I had always thought that Mistral was just a character being role-played, like I played BlackRose. But now that I had met her face to face, I realized she had just been playing as her true self all along.

"But," I said, breaking the lull in our conversation, "why didn't you want to tell me about it via e-mail? It really caught me off-guard."

"Hmm," she said. "It's because I wanted to meet you first, then tell you. I wanted us to talk not as game characters but as people."

I wanted to meet you first, then tell you. Somehow embarrassed by those words, I cast my eyes downward. Then, at a thought, I asked, "Does Kite know?"

hack // Another Birth

"I told him," she said. "In the game, though."

"In the game . . ."

"You didn't hear anything from him about it?"

"Nah," I said. "Kite's tough when it comes to things like that."

I broke off. *Am I starting to sound like . . . her?*

Mistral—Mayumi—fixed her gaze on me when I fell silent, and seemed about to open her mouth, like she wanted to pick the exact right moment to say something.

Is there something else she hasn't told me yet? Unable to stand the awkward silence, I spoke up. "Anyway, shall we do some sightseeing? The weather's nice, so we might as well stroll around."

"Sure thing. Let's go!" Smiling, she started to walk. I must have seemed anxious again, so she looked back and said, "If it gets difficult for me, I'll let you know!"

Before long, my anxiety had faded away. We spied some unusual Chinese desserts like shark fin buns and squid ink buns for sale in a shop, and though we complained about how expensive they were, we bought some to try out. We also both bought cute panda straps in a Chinese variety shop. The way we went around whooping it up, it was like we were sisters. She seemed happy the entire time, and despite the fact that I was the one who lived in Yokohama, it was my first visit to Chinatown, so I also enjoyed going around and looking at everything.

But eventually our prearranged stopping time of before sunset drew near, so we started heading back toward the station.

"I had fun today," I said, bowing to her in front of the station's ticket gate, but she gazed at me sadly. "Wh-what's the matter?"

She only shook her head.

"Are you worn out?"

"Uh-uh . . ." she said, turning her head.

"This isn't like you, Mayumi," I said. "Just go on and say whatever it is you need to say." But the silence continued.

She looked up slowly at me as I tilted my head questioningly. "Well," she began. "I . . . I can't do anything dangerous anymore."

Anything dangerous? What's she talking about?

She took a breath and continued. "So . . . the game, I—I thought we'd be together until the end."

Reality dawned on me. "Ah."

"I'm sorry," she offered.

I was quick to shake my head. There was no reason for her to apologize. I mean, I more than anyone was supposed to know just how dangerous it was. And I couldn't even imagine what might happen in the game from this point forward. If something dangerous did come up, and Mistral were to get wrapped up in it . . . "Why are you apologizing? You've got a baby to look out for. Please don't worry about it."

"Yeah . . ."

"Do your best," I said. "That might sound like a strange thing to say in this situation, but—please do your best."

She smiled. "Yeah. You too, Akira! I'll keep checking my e-mail, so give me a report if there's any progress?"

"Yes. I promise," I said, and smiled. The game would be lonelier without her around, but I didn't want her to feel any more of a burden.

hack // Another Birth

"Okay then," she said. "I'm off!" Waving, she passed through the ticket gate, and I watched her retreating figure until she passed out of sight.



I returned home and again became BlackRose. With no pressing destination to visit, I went to Dun Loireag—the place where I had first met Mistral. I planted myself in the spot she had shown me that had the great view.

The day I first met her had been the same day I had realized I was all alone in my tennis club. Meeting her that day had gone a long way toward soothing my feelings. Remembering how I'd felt back then, my eyes began to blur with tears. It was in truth only a couple of months past, but it felt like ages ago.

When I had talked to Mistral here, she had listened quietly and attentively, and never asked me any unwelcome questions. What a relief that had been for me . . . If I hadn't met her, I would have hung on to my self-doubt and quite possibly never gotten the courage to tell anyone the reason why I kept coming to The World.

I knew I shouldn't try to stop my comrades from bowing out. But to be honest, I felt uneasy about just Kite and myself fighting to the bitter end. Even so, neither Kite nor I were so irresponsible that we'd invite anyone to help who didn't fully comprehend the situation.

For me, Mistral leaving was a severe blow to my spirits.

she_became_complicated

"It was just the two of us to begin with, so if we put our hearts into it—!" I tried giving voice to the words to lend them even more weight, but they just echoed hollowly. I fought down a sigh, but the moment I went to stand up, someone spoke from behind me.

"Have you seen Mia?"

When I turned around, there stood Elk. He looked like he was going to cry.

"No," I said. "Have you tried e-mailing her?"

He sighed. "E-mail . . . gets returned."

"Returned? Maybe her address changed."

"If she changed it, she would've let me know . . ." Elk hung his head.

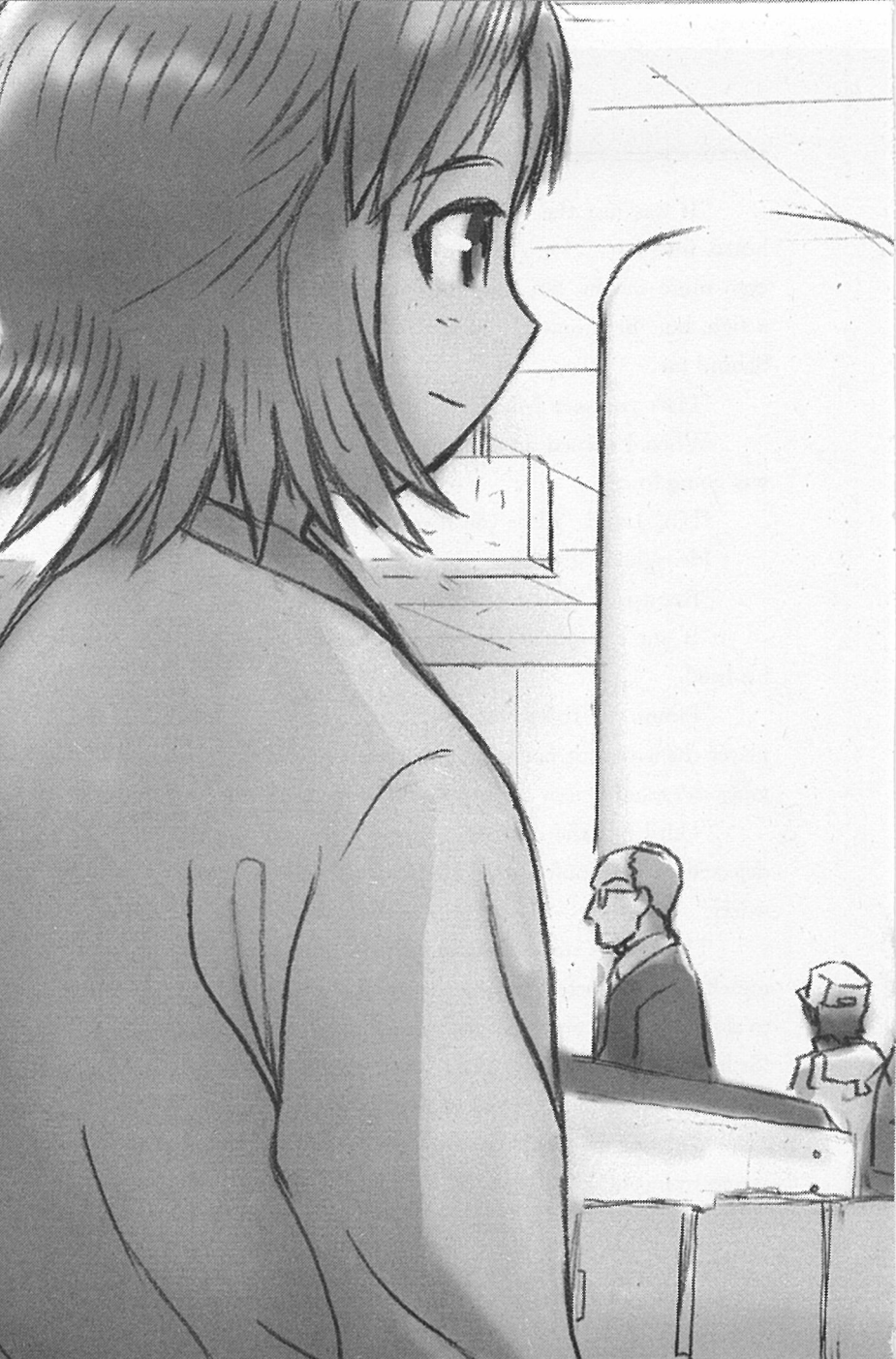
"Hmm . . ." To be honest, I thought Mia was neither a regular player character nor non-player character. *Am I the only one who has the feeling she's something more like Aura, or like Skeith and the others?*

"Until just the other day, we were always together," Elk said dejectedly. "And now she suddenly disappears, so I can't help but worry."

The way he stood there with his head down reminded me of myself when I started playing the game—when I didn't know what to do and was so anxious that I just wanted to cry. "Want to look for her?" I said. "I'll help you."

Elk looked up at me in surprise. "You sure?"

"I'm worried too," I confessed. "I heard from Kite that she was acting strangely."





.hack // Another Birth

His eyes shone with gratitude. "Thanks!" Now cheerful, he exchanged member addresses with me, and the two of us stopped by the Delta server town Mac•Anu and then headed for Δ: Plenteous, Smiling, Hypha. It was apparently an area Elk and Mia had hung out a lot in.

"Battle level 14?" I queried.

"Yeah," Elk confirmed. "Lower levels are easier to search in." At my questioning glance, he said, "For aromatic grass." With that cryptic reply, he ran off toward the dungeon. I followed after him, over the contaminated, deep red meadow, and we entered the dungeon.

I wonder if there will be any Data Bugs here? At that thought, I halted in mid-stride.

Elk looked at me curiously. "Let's keep moving."

"Uh . . . yeah," I said.

I hope there aren't! With that fervent wish, I tightly gripped my massive sword and continued onward. Every time a monster emerged from a magic portal, I felt a rush. If any of them were a Data Bug, the numeric level of the area would be meaningless. With that worst case scenario in mind, I used a Speed Charm item to temporarily increase my movement speed so that I'd be able to run away if necessary. Fighting Data Bugs was dangerous in the first place, but without Kite around it was downright impossible.

Oblivious to how anxious I was at his side, Elk steadily progressed along his familiar path. We searched every corner of every room, and even passages terminating in dead ends—but we

she_became_complicated

were eventually forced to admit that Mia was nowhere to be found in this dungeon.

"She might be somewhere else in the field," Elk muttered, but we returned to Mac•Anu.

She wasn't in the dungeon. I was pretty sure she wasn't anywhere else in the field either. *If e-mail to her just bounces, could that mean she's quit the game entirely?*

Elk just stood there with his back turned and his head once again down. It would have been natural to voice the possibility that she had quit, but with Elk's feelings right now—the loss he was feeling—saying that would only push him even farther into depression.

But hey, Elk . . . Taking this all on yourself won't solve anything.

"She wasn't in that area," I said, "but hey, she might be somewhere else. Or maybe she's just logged out sometimes." *So, cheer up, will you, Elk?*

"I'm leaving now," he suddenly whispered.

"Ah—" I began, but before I could finish the thought, Elk logged out before my eyes. My hand, which had been reaching out for him, closed on empty air.

Although I knew that detaining him any longer would have accomplished nothing, I couldn't simply leave him be. Seeing him like that reminded me too much of when I'd lost Fumikazu.



.hack // Another Birth

When I logged out of The World, I found that an e-mail from Haru had arrived. Haru was a player character that Fumikazu, as Kazu, had gotten to know while playing The World. I'd happened to come across her as well, and we exchanged occasional e-mails in this manner. But Haru didn't know that the players behind BlackRose and Kazu were siblings in the real world—the only people in The World who knew that were Kite and Mistral.

The e-mail Haru had sent was an invitation to join a party. It also mentioned a thread on the BBS that she was concerned about. Closing the message, I looked through the recent BBS threads.

"Maybe it's . . . this one?" I said, peering at a likely candidate.

It simply said, "I don't know how to go adventuring, so could someone show me the basics?" There wasn't any part of this message written by a player character named Ryoko Terajima that seemed especially concerning, but in her e-mail message, Haru had written, "If I were Kazu, I'm sure I'd go." With that in mind, there was no way I was going to sit back and do nothing, so I returned to The World once again.



From the Chaos Gate I transferred to Fort Ouph. *If Ryoko Terajima is someone who can access this high-level server, yet doesn't even know the basics—and who's using what looks like a real name (though with the family name first) for the name of her character—what the heck kind of person is she?*

she_became_complicated

As soon as I had warped in through Fort Ouph's Chaos Gate, Haru came running up to me. A large sword that seemed quite out of proportion to her small frame hung at her hip.

"BlackRose!" she cried. "I'm sorry for being so sudden." She bobbed her head rapidly—and her twin ponytails like rabbit ears swung about in time with each bow.

"Not at all," I said. "No worries."

Haru shifted her eyes away and looked around furtively. "This is my first time," she said. "Coming here."

Hub? "Really?"

"Yes!" she laughed. "I guess you could say I felt some kind of affinity for Terajima—I just felt like I wanted to help her out." She looked up at me apologetically. "But, it seems my level isn't really high enough, so . . . I'm sorry for asking you." She grimaced.

I was dumbfounded. I'd been certain Haru had been coming to this server for a long time. But now that I thought about it, I'd met her in an area you could get to from Carmina Gadelica, one rank below this server. That hadn't been all that many days earlier, so it did make sense that today could be her first time here.

"Okay," I said, shrugging and taking stock. *Even taking Haru into account, I should have enough recovery items.* "Well, let's get going."

We headed straight for Σ : Cracked, Worst, Milestone. The area level was 54—a little higher than my current stats. It was just right for me to level up in, but I had a feeling that having Haru along would make for a difficult time.

•hack // Another Birth

"I can't back out now just because I don't like the keywords, or the area level's a little high," I muttered to myself while staring at the completely black transfer screen. *Even so, why'd she choose such creepy keywords? If all she wants to do is learn the ropes of adventuring, she could've chosen something else.* This Ryoko Terajima seemed incomprehensible to me.

The field at Σ : Cracked, Worst, Milestone was, sure enough, contaminated. It was a desert landscape that appeared to have burned spots. The virus had spread throughout all of The World—it would be no surprise now to encounter a Data Bug at any place, anytime. There was no way I could let my guard down.

I gripped my controller tightly.

"It said on the BBS that she'd be on floor BI of the dungeon, right?" Haru said, looking at me uneasily for confirmation.

I realized I had stopped moving. I slung my massive sword on my back and nodded. "Yeah. Why don't we get going?"

"Right!" Haru chirped.

We headed for the dungeon, avoiding tripping as many magical portals as we could. Right after we entered it, we encountered another player character.

"Have you seen Ryoko Terajima? I came here because of her post," he said.

"No, we just got here ourselves," I replied.

"Okay . . . You read it too?" he asked.

"Yes," Haru answered, and when she emerged from behind me, she looked small and meek.

she_became_complicated

Seeing her, the other player chuckled. "You too? Are you okay for this area?"

"Ugh," I groaned. *What's with this guy? Talk about obnoxious.* "She just came along to raise her level."

The other player laughed and took off down the passageway. *It isn't just nice people who come to The World,* I thought. After I gave Haru a reassuring smile, we started moving into the depths of the dungeon.

She was quiet for a long while, but when we finally made it to floor B2, she broke the silence. "I'm sorry . . ."

"Hmm?" I said.

"I really am a burden, aren't I?"

I shook my head. "That's not true!"

"But I wasn't even able to stand up for myself with that guy back there." Her voice was subdued, like all the spirit had gone out of her.

"Tsk," I said with a small smile. "You just have to go on and say whatever it is you need to say."

At those words, Haru's eyes widened in surprise. "That's . . .!"

"Hmm?"

"That's what Kazu . . . Kazu said his sister always says that!"

I blinked. *I know Fumikazu has a tendency to run off at the mouth even worse than a girl, but I never thought he'd talk about me to people in The World!*

"And he said . . ." Haru continued, as we walked along. "He said he was trying to get her to play as a Heavy Blade, but that he didn't think it was likely she ever would . . ."

.hack // Another Birth

Gotta nip this in the bud. “You think there’s some kind of connection between this Kazu guy and me?”

Haru nodded and stared over at me, her eyes still wide.

I sniffed. “There are all kinds of people who use the same common phrases I use.”

“B-but . . .”

The way she kept stealing glances at me as we went, like she was trying to see the person sitting at the computer, I knew I had a problem. *If she figures this situation out right now, what’ll she think? If she found out how dangerous the game is, would she quit?* No. I was sure she’d offer to help, for Kazu’s sake.

And that would be the absolute worst.

“Ah!” Haru cried, catching sight of something over my shoulder, so I turned and looked.

The rude player character we’d met earlier was standing behind us in the passageway. “You two are still wandering around down here?” he asked.

I moved to get between him and Haru. “So?”

“Hey, all I wanted to do was let you know that if you’re still looking for Terajima,” he said, “she’s already gone.”

“Gone?” Haru cried.

“Yeah. She formed a party with a red guy a while ago.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling a bit relieved. *If I had to stay with Haru any longer, she might’ve figured out who I really was.* “Then, oh well, right?”

We awkwardly thanked him—*Guess he wasn’t so rude after all*—then made our way out of the dungeon and back to Fort Ouph. As

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I was looking for a legitimate excuse for shaking Haru, an e-mail message arrived, so I told her I had to check it, and logged out.



The message was from Kite. While I'd been aimlessly running around like a chicken with its head cut off, he'd gone alone to Net Slum and asked Helba for advice.

How could he do something important like that without inviting me?

I quickly fired off a reply.

Next time you want to go somewhere like that, you'll be taking me with you!

When the message finished sending, I went to lie down on my bed. It had been a full day—I was worn out. Going to meet with Mistral, then adventuring with both Elk and Haru . . . had that really been the best possible use of my time? Was it wrong that I hadn't been thinking about other possible ways to look for the remaining five Phases listed in the *Epitaph of Twilight*?

Just as I was starting to drift off, my computer made the "new mail" sound again. *Could that be Kite?* I dragged my sluggish body from the bed and checked the message. From its title, I could tell Kite had sent back some trivial response.

"He better make up for forgetting me!" I grumbled. But a quick response like that when it wasn't strictly necessary made me

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kind of happy. My sleepy eyes scanned the contents. "Whaaat!" I cried out loud, shocked by what it said.

So loud, in fact, that Mom called up from downstairs, "Akira, is something the matter?"

I hurriedly opened my door and called back, "Sorry! It's nothing! Uh, good night!" Then I sprang back to my desk.

I reread the message over and over. "You've got to be kidding," I muttered. *This isn't what I expected at all.*

. . . I'm in eighth grade.

It was nice and all that he was telling me things about himself, but . . . middle school? That meant he was a kid the same age as Fumikazu! And if Kite was in middle school, then so was his friend Orca. And if *he* was that age, then did that mean his partner Balmung was too?

"Mistral, where are you when I need you?" I moaned. *I'm—BlackRose is—surrounded by middle schoolers!*

So all this time, I'd been whining and blowing up at a middle school student . . . Thinking back on all I'd said in Kite's presence, I felt my face getting red. "Oh man!"

But . . . Even if he was younger than me, even if he *was* in middle school, Kite was still Kite. *We'll still feel the same connection as always, right?* But even with that thought in mind, I found myself too embarrassed to send him any reply.



"Akira, are you okay?"

Risa peered worriedly at my face as I sat on the bed in the school nurse's office the next day.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I said. "Sorry." I gave a little laugh. I'd been spacing out all day, and somehow twisted my left ankle right before tennis practice. The team captain told me it might be sprained, and to have it checked out and take the rest of the day off. The nurse said it wasn't sprained, but it still hurt.

"When I got to practice, you weren't there, Akira," Risa said, setting my bag beside me—she'd brought it from the club room. "Talk about a shock! You were also nodding off during class today. Are you getting enough sleep? You know, practice this week is optional, so you could've just taken it easy and focused on getting ready for the cultural festival."

That's right—the school festival's this weekend. In order for everyone to have time to get ready, club participation had been declared optional. "I just wanted to keep in shape, doing drills or something," I mumbled. Team selection for the winter term was coming up soon, so I wanted to get at least a little practice in. I felt like since I wasn't such an outcast on the team anymore, I could try to aim for a higher placement.

As for the festival, Risa, myself, and the others from my class were doing a haunted house, and honestly there wasn't any real preparation for me to do at all. One girl had volunteered to do all the costumes—all the rest of us had to do was show up on the day of, and we'd be set.

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"Well, a lot of good the practice will do if all you do is hurt yourself!" Risa chided. "Can you stand up?"

With a worried look, she held out a hand. I nervously took it and stood up, relying on my right leg, then gingerly shifted my weight to my left.

"Ow!" The pain shot through my ankle like a million needles . . . or one really big one. Although the nurse had put a compress on it, it didn't look like I'd be running around—much less playing tennis—for a while. I scowled.

Trying to support me, Risa moved to my side. "Should I see you home?"

"No," I grumbled. "I'm all right. I only need one foot to pedal my bike."

She paused. "Are you for real?"

I laughed. "It's a snap! Don't worry about it." Limping, I grabbed my stuff and left the nurse's office behind.

Risa chased after me. "Should I call Shouko?"

"I said I'm fine," I protested. Apparently not convinced by my tough act, Risa hummed to herself in contemplation as she skipped along beside my hobbling form.

Getting myself injured because of lack of sleep is nothing more than I deserve. Because of that, I felt like it was only fair that I make my own way home without burdening someone else. But man, this must look really pathetic . . .

"Akira," Risa eventually said, "You be sure to e-mail me when you get home, all right?"

"Roger," I said, waving her off. Reluctantly, she went her way.

Just about dragging my throbbing leg by then, I headed for the bike rack. As I was getting the bike out, I thought I heard someone call from behind me, but when I turned around, I didn't see anyone—just a line of karate club members jogging by. Balanced on one foot and leaning on my bike, I grimaced as I watched their limber feet receding.

Jerks.

With a little effort, I got on the bike and started toward home, taking care not to put any weight on my twisted ankle.

"Hold on!"

This time the voice was clear and familiar, so I hit the brake and put my right foot down. Looking over my shoulder, I saw Hagiya jogging up.

"What're you doing, with an injury like that?" he said. He must've been on his way home, as he was carrying his bag and guitar case.

How does he know I got injured? I stared blankly at him as he approached.

Hagiya grabbed a handlebar. "You can sit on the back of the bike," he said. "Move, move."

"Wha?" I blinked in surprise as I looked at him.

"Let me see you home—that is, I'll be your chauffeur, okay?"

What is he doing? I just kept staring up at him.

He frowned. "You're injured. You really expect me to watch you try to go home by all by yourself?"

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The silence was deafening. *Where does he get off thinking he's earned the right to be some kind of protector to me?*

Passing students glanced over at this tableau with curiosity in their eyes.

"No thank you," I said. "I can get home on my own."

"No you can't!" Hagiya said. "There's a limit to how much you can overdo things, you know, without things getting absurd."

He was trying to be altruistic and gallant, but boy did it come off as insensitive and patronizing. *Didn't I already turn this guy down?* I glared at him and wrested the handlebar away, ignoring the pain and pedaling forward again.

"H-hey! Wait up!" he cried, and reached out to grab my shoulder. Thrown off-balance, I caught myself with my left leg—the one with the injured ankle—and was rewarded by a sharp, shooting pain.

"Ouch!"

"Ah!" he said, hurriedly letting go. "Uh, sorry . . ."

"What on earth are you *doing*?" I thought I already gave you my answer." All this time I'd been mad at myself for being so careless that I got myself injured, and now my anger easily burst out at this new target. "Please, just leave me alone!" I spat out, riding to get away from there as quickly as possible.

"I worry about you because I like you!" he cried out from behind. "You're always on my mind!"

So what? You don't know the first thing about me. Still pedaling, I looked back over my shoulder and gave him a self-righteous glare. "I turned you down," I declared coldly, then turned back and accelerated.



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"You take too much on yourself!" he called, and I stopped dead.

He was right, wasn't he? Since the day Fumikazu fell into his coma, that attitude had been with me constantly. So why did it hurt to hear it?

Hagiya caught up to me again. "I'm tired of just watching," he said. "If there's anything I can do to help, I want to—"

"It doesn't have anything to do with you," I interrupted him, and took off pedaling for home. This time I didn't look back.

Hearing it from Shouko was one thing—she knew what stress I was under from Fumikazu being in the hospital. Why should I have to hear it from Hagiya too?

After that, my cell phone rang again and again, but I didn't answer it.



As soon as the e-mail from Wiseman arrived, I logged on to The World. The message said something about the data capacity of Σ : Turbulent, Distrusting, Ice Wall swelling, indicating that something was lurking there. *Could it be the fifth Phase?*

Upon arriving at Fort Ouph, before I even had a chance to turn my head, I received a party invitation from Kite. I accepted. "Been waiting long?" I asked.

"No, I just got here too," he said. He was standing right in front of the Chaos Gate. So was Wiseman.

That's surprising. "You too?"

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Wiseman nodded. "I think it's time I check this out for myself."

He already knows as much as us about this, or more, so he's well aware of the danger he'll be getting himself into, I thought. Glancing over at Kite, I could tell he agreed. We nodded at each other, then added Wiseman to the party. His name appeared alongside ours in the status bar at the bottom of the screen.

"Everyone ready?" Kite said. He called up the transfer menu, but sure enough, this was another protected area. He started inserting virus cores into the appropriate crystals.

"I see," Wiseman's voice echoed in the blackness of the gate hacking screen. "So that's how you use them."

"Thanks for giving me this one," Kite said, slipping a virus core into the final slot.

After a chime indicating that all the cores had been inserted, we finally started to warp out.

The first thing we heard upon arriving in the field was a surprise to me—Helba's voice. "Well? Can you hear me?"

I looked around the snowy wasteland, trying to figure out where the sound was coming from, but didn't see her.

"Yes," Kite answered.

Apparently he was expecting this?

"Okay!" Helba's voice replied. "The channel's good on this end, too! I would be most inconvenient if Lios noticed us, so I'll activate the jammer just before combat starts. Now, hurry!" Then she fell silent.

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"Let's hurry!" Kite said, taking off at a sudden run.

"Wait!" I cried, halting him. *What's a jammer? What the hell were we about to try to do?*

But before I could voice my question, Wiseman spoke up. "If we assume that the source of this contamination is the 'abominable Wave,' perhaps one way to keep the contamination from spreading is to run a jammer program to defend against proliferation in areas where the Wave manifests itself."

"Jammer program?" *I'm not sure I understand all that . . .*

"It's a program that is used to confuse the enemy," Wiseman simplified.

"I went to see Helba the other day and asked her for it," Kite said.

Well, that's a good enough explanation for now, I thought.

"Okay, let's go!" Kite urged, and he led us in a dash across the miserable snowfield.

"I wonder if it'll be on the lowest level like always," I mused as we approached the dungeon entrance.

"Might be," Kite said with a rueful smile, and we stepped in.

The dungeon was littered with a large variety of monsters with magical and physical tolerance. Fighting them took some coordination, but we were able to get through them all with the use of some magical charms.

"This is it," Kite said, drawing up in front of a light purple mist on the lowest level. I agreed, and Wiseman cast strengthening magic on us, as Mistral had done before.

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"Thanks, Wiseman," I said, but when I looked over at him he was eyeing the mist keenly.

"It's in here?" He must have thought the strengthening spells insufficient, because he followed them with attribute tolerance augments items.

"Yeah," I said. "There's no mistaking it."

I gripped my massive sword tightly. Kite looked first me and then Wiseman in the eyes, and stepped into the mist.

The screen suddenly glared an all-encompassing white, and I squinted at the brightness. Soon I could make out light purple oscillations pouring in from every direction. *That must be the Wave! What's going to show up next? One of the Phases named in the Epitaph of Twilight fragment?*

The screen inverted, then returned to normal. We found ourselves warped somewhere like the same area where we'd fought Skeith, Innis, and Magus. I looked to see what horror lay before us, and—

"What the hell? It's a *mask* this time?" The words just sprang from my mouth of their own volition, I swear!

The thing we were facing had a round head and a squarish body. It looked like a completely organic creature, but two open holes in the body gave the impression of a mask. Its surface was smooth and flat like Innis had been.

"Launching program," Helba's voice came out of nowhere again. "Audio and visual communication from this end will now cease functioning. Static on the screen will signal the onset of battle. Good luck!"

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Static is the signal, eh? I steeled myself. We're not about to lose!

"Ready!" we cried in unison, and that instant static flashed across the display. The jammer program had launched.

Kite and I faced the Phase and attacked simultaneously. Its name indicator read "Fidchell," yet another name from the *Epitaph* fragment we'd read.

What the . . . ? Our attacks are landing solidly, but that hit points gauge sure isn't budging!

"Watch out!" Wiseman cautioned, just as Fidchell moved away. The text "Oracle: Devil Quake" scrolled into the log.

Oracle? What does this thing think it is?

And Fidchell spoke. "All will tremble under the rage of the earth," its voice rang out.

"Huh? It tal—" I cried, but the words weren't completely out of my mouth when Fidchell's attack struck the three of us simultaneously.

Fidchell spoke, yet none of the previous enemies ever said anything. Don't tell me these things are evolving!

Checking my hit points after Fidchell's attack, I didn't see any change—but then I noticed an icon indicating that my earth element tolerance was reduced.

"What the heck?"

Wiseman rushed over and used an item to counteract the abnormal icon.

"Let's just focus on attacking and let Wiseman handle recovery," Kite said.

I nodded, but as I could respond to my own needs more quickly anyway, I used SP recovery items freely before unleashing some more attack skills.

Unhindered by our attacks, Fidchell's tail section glowed.

What the? My movement controls suddenly went unresponsive, and I realized that BlackRose was suspended in midair. Fidchell's tail section rose before my avatar's eyes—revealing a bracelet that looked very familiar. It looked like *Kite's* bracelet, with a similar graphical targeting system . . . locked directly on to BlackRose.

"Nooo!" I cried out, but all I could do was stare helplessly at my screen as an arrow of light sprang from the bracelet and pierced BlackRose right through the torso. But unlike I had seen happen to Orca and what must have happened to Fumikazu as well, my mind was unscathed . . . perhaps it had something to do with what Mia had mentioned—the grace of the bracelet. Instead, my character fell to the ground and a whole line of abnormality icons lined up above my status bar. I cleared them up using a few items before Wiseman and Kite could even run over to me.

"I'm fine," I growled. "So let's get this thing!"

Kite smiled with relief and held out an arm to help me up. Making sure that the text "Protect Break OK" had appeared, Kite shouted, "Here we go!" He aimed and fired in one fluid motion, and Fidchell froze, transfixed by the bracelet's beam.

"Ohh!" Wiseman marveled from behind us, seeing a data drain for the first time. "So, this is the true form of the Wave's Phases." He stared at Fidchell, which had turned to stone just as the first three Phases had

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done after being data drained. It was now no more than a collection of stones of various sizes connected by tattered pieces of cloth.

"Get it!" Kite cried, and he and I laid into it with attack skills. Now its hit points dropped steadily, and even Wiseman took a break from recovery spells to chant an attack spell at the petrified Fidchell.

"Merrows," he said, and a summoned beast in the form of a six-winged, light blue, translucent seahorse appeared, which rotated once and then shot blocks of ice at the stone Phase. At that moment, Fidchell's hit points reached zero. It was finished.

Kite paused and stood still. Thinking that was odd, I ran over to him. "What's wrong?"

"I got a segment," Kite replied.

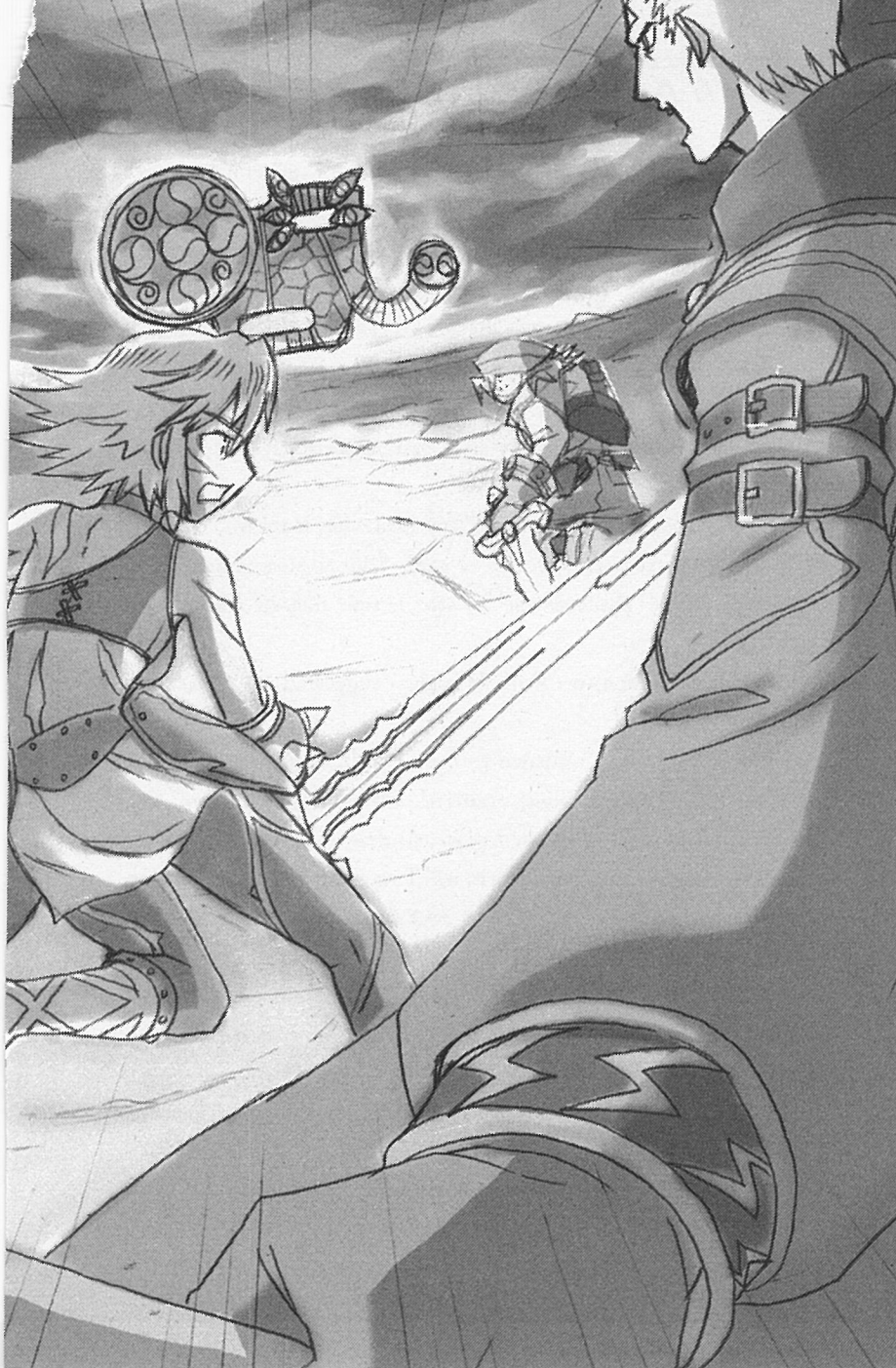
A segment of . . . ? "Aura's?"

"That's what it looks like," Kite said.

Maybe Wiseman thought it was odd for us to start a quiet conversation with the Foe still frozen there in the room, because he walked over to us. "Does this mean the battle's over?" he asked.

"Oh!" Kite said. "Umm . . . Huh?" He and I both expected something else to happen, as had occurred after the defeat of the three previous Phases, but this time, nothing did. Fidchell just quietly crumbled. However, as he disappeared, a final message from him scrolled through the log.

Like a frenzied horse that is driven,
An unseen wind of Plague shrieks across
the border.



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Pandemonium, wailing, and stench of carnage fills the air.

There is no place to run, no hope of escape.

Those who are mourned will never return.
The hands of time cannot be turned back.

We recognized the literary style easily enough: it was like the *Epitaph of Twilight*.

"What was that?" Kite said. "Any idea what it means?"

"I don't have a clue, sorry," I said. "But it sure sounds like bad news." *Plague? Pandemonium? Nowhere to run? Yeah, I'd call that bad!* I shivered.

"Shall we return to town?" Wiseman suggested, and Kite and I nodded slowly.

But even once we returned to Fort Ouph, we didn't recognize any signs of calamity having occurred. Of course, the town was already contaminated in the first place, so that wasn't saying much.

"Nothing's . . . changed, has it?" I murmured. "Doesn't that mean that we pulled it off?" *Please don't let things get weirder than they already are . . .*

"I sure hope so," Kite said, looking around the area uneasily. As I watched him, I thought about the words that had appeared in the log after Fidchell's defeat.

Those who are mourned will never return. The hands of time cannot be turned back.

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Taken literally, it said that people who were gone wouldn't come back again, because time didn't move in reverse.

In that case, Fumikazu is . . .

Not caring to go down the only track that train of thought could possibly run on, I tore the goggles from my face as fast as I could.

It Broke Bounds●

The rest of the night after we sent Fiddhell packing, I didn't sleep one wink. After an eternity of trying, the clamor from the living room below made it clear that morning had come, so I gave it up for a lost cause. Fingertips pressed to my temples in a vain attempt to stave off a headache, I trudged downstairs toward the noise.

The living room was a flurry of morning activity. Mom was juggling getting breakfast ready and helping Kouta change his clothes. Dad was nursing a cup of coffee in one hand, a newspaper grasped in his other as his feet automatically walked him toward the bathroom. Someone had turned the TV on to the news, and my eyes gravitated toward the screen.

"From late last night until dawn this morning, an apparent problem with the city's traffic control grid caused malfunctions in traffic signals throughout the region, beginning downtown but spreading to successively larger areas. At the same time, a large

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number of accidents have been reported, but whether a connection exists between these two phenomena has not yet been determined.”

I have a bad feeling about this . . . I changed the channel using the remote.

“On the JR Keihin–Tohoku line between Shinagawa and Omiya, an apparent malfunction has caused all stop signals to light up. The rail schedule is consequently in disarray.”

What else could be wrong?

“Ah!”

I turned around at Kouta’s cry of dismay. He had apparently tried to pour himself a cupful of milk from the carton unassisted, and there was now a large puddle spreading to engulf the table. *Just like my anxiety . . .*

“It’s okay. I’ll do it,” I told Mom, who was trying to reach for a dishrag and tend something on the stove at the same time. I grabbed the rag and started sopping up the milk.

“I’m sorry.” Kouta’s mouth turned down in a pout. He was just too cute to be angry at.

“It’s all right,” I said as I finished wiping. “What a big boy you’re becoming, Kouta! Pouring the milk by yourself!” A smile returned to his face, but my anxiety wasn’t as easy to get rid of as the milk puddle.

During the long night, various disaster scenarios had tumbled through my mind over and over. Network crises, fires breaking out, buildings collapsing—if strife like what had hit Minato Mirai became widespread, then . . .

it_broke_bounds

However, judging by the TV, apparently no disaster as big as I'd imagined had struck. But still . . . My cell phone vibrated. Flipping it open, I saw I'd gotten an e-mail from Mistral.

"You'll be late if you don't hurry," Mom said to me, laying out plates on the table, but I ignored her and checked the message.

Morning! So did something happen in the same yesterday? A lot is happening in the real world, but they don't seem related. I bet it's just a coincidence. Don't let it get you down! (^_^)

I really wanted to believe what was going on was unrelated. *But there's no way that's true*, I thought. *Even Mistral must have sensed something, if she went out of her way to send me an e-mail about it.*

Network crisis. It hadn't become a large-scale disaster like what had happened before in Yokohama, but I got the feeling that—in a gradual manner for which it was harder to connect the dots—it was spreading in the real world.

My anxiety remained unassuaged all through school.



The first thing I did after I got back home was start up my computer and check my e-mail. There was a new message.

"Kite . . ."

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Yesterday things had been so tense that we'd logged off without really saying much of anything to each other. Kite must have been just as preoccupied with the situation as I was.

"An unseen wind of Plague shrieks across the border."

You remember Fidchell's final words, right? I thought about them for a long time after logging out. About what they might mean . . . and I'm sure he was talking about what happened today. The virus isn't staying confined to The World; it's overflowing into our realm-into the real world. Does it make as much sense to you as it does to me that the "border" he was talking about is the network that connects the game to reality? But . . . even if that's true, I just don't want to believe the words that came next. You know what I mean, BlackRose?

Yeah. I knew exactly what he meant. I didn't want to believe it either. There's got to be some other interpretation.

I really want to believe that . . .

I stopped typing my reply and erased what I'd written. *This is too heavy to discuss via e-mail*, I thought, so I instead just sent off a short note inviting Kite to meet up in-game. He quickly responded agreeably, so I jumped into The World.



"Heya!"

I saw Kite in front of the Chaos Gate, and ran up to him, waving. We promptly formed a party so we could chat without anyone else listening in on our conversation.

Kite didn't waste any time, but picked right up where the e-mail left off. "So, what do you think about what Fidchell said?"

The words Fidchell had uttered—in a grave voice that smacked of prophecy—ran through my mind. "I'm not sure what to say," I told him, then fell silent, an ominous feeling in my heart.

Kite glanced down at the ground and suddenly he appeared very small. "Even though The World is supposed to exist just as a closed virtual world on the 'net, the contamination is spreading to the real world," he said.

What could I add to that? I looked down at Kite's bracelet, which other players couldn't see unless they were in a party with him. What a truly heavy burden this boy had been made to bear . . . and he was younger than me, still in middle school! "You know, though," I said hesitantly, "I don't think the situation is quite as bad as you say. It's not like there's pandemonium." It just wouldn't be fair to him if I

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said what I really thought, to voice the concern weighing so heavily on my heart—that every time we did something, all it did was make the situation deteriorate even further.

Kite and I both stared at the ground in silence then.

“H-hey,” I eventually said in a deliberately cheerful voice to force a change of topic. “How’ve things been lately?”

Kite stared at me. “Lately?”

“Yeah. It’s not like we’re together all the time, you know,” I continued. “Let’s each share what we’ve been doing while the other one wasn’t there—if you don’t mind.”

Kite smiled a somewhat troubled smile. “I . . . saw Mia,” he said.

“Mia?” *That’s unexpected!*

“I’m trying to remember when that was.” Kite scratched the back of his head. “The previous time, her Japanese speaking ability was all screwy, but that wasn’t the problem this time.”

“What could be stranger than that?”

“She said her memory was fuzzy,” Kite replied.

“Fuzzy?”

“Yeah. When she saw me, she asked who I was! After a little while it was like she suddenly remembered me again, but I thought it was really weird.”

“Maybe she was just worn out?” I suggested. “Everyone has stuff going on in their lives in the real world, you know.” But as the words came out of my mouth, I thought—*Does Mia even have a real world?* The idea took me aback. If she was a player character,

of course her player existed in the real world. *But what if Mia's . . .* It was just a random thought, but it kept turning over in my head. *What is she?*

"Anyway, I haven't seen Mia after that," Kite said. "But it seems that Elk has been looking for her for a long time."

"For Mia?" I asked.

"Yeah. I saw him too."

Elk seems to use the game only so he can hang out with Mia, I thought. And if I, who am not very close with Mia at all, can't help but suspect things about her, then I'm sure Elk has been too.

"Sorry, but," Kite said, as I was lost in thought, "I've got to go for the day."

"Oh. Okay . . . uh, sorry to call you in like this," I said. "You've got to get some rest yourself, or you'll get worn out too."

"Thanks." Kite nodded. "Good night." He logged out right in front of me.

With my eyes half-focused on the spot he'd vacated, I fell back into thought. *Kite had said "I saw him too."* I had the strongest desire to talk Elk. *Maybe he's still around?*

I looked everywhere in Fort Ouph, but Elk was nowhere to be found. *If I were him, what would I do?* I got the impression that Elk wouldn't go adventuring when his constant companion Mia wasn't around. So assuming he wasn't logged out, he must be in some town somewhere.

I transferred to another server to look for him in its root town as well. *I want to ask about Mia. But also . . . I don't want to leave Elk alone.*

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Fumikazu had all but vanished from my family. And now Mistral, the one person I'd been able to let my guard down with in the game, was gone as well. *People who were doing fine until now are suddenly disappearing . . .* I started to feel like I understood how losing Mia had affected Elk. As long as he continued to look for her, I couldn't ignore his feelings.

When I transferred to the Delta server, some words in the conversation of passing player characters caught my interest, and I stopped to listen unobtrusively.

"Isn't that the guy who used to hang around with the cat-type player character?" a Heavy Blade said. "I heard he got swindled out of every last one of his items."

"Yeah, that's him," a Blademaster replied. "Nowadays he just sits around in that deserted spot for hours at a time."

The two of them laughed. *They're talking about Elk.*

Most of Mac•Anu was made up of waterways. If you turned off the main street where all the shops stood in a row, there was an alley in the bowels of Mac•Anu that dead-ended on a canal, with nothing to do there. That sounded like a good candidate for the "deserted spot" the second guy had mentioned.

And that's exactly where I found Elk, sitting at the edge of the canal, looking at the water. I sat down quietly next to him. As Mistral had done for me before, I said not a word, but just waited to hear what he had to say.

But Elk didn't exactly cooperate. He just sat and stared at my face, with an expression that seemed to ask, "Why are you here?"



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I just smiled in response, but all that got me was a knitted brow over his cautious eyes. So I gave up the silent tack.

"This is a nice place, isn't it?" I said.

Elk seemed to consider that for a while, then nodded wordlessly.

We gazed for a while at the waterway. Lit by that world's late evening sun, the water's surface was dyed a brilliant orange.

After a very long silence, Elk finally opened his mouth. "This is the place . . . where I first met Mia."

"Is that so?" I asked casually.

Elk nodded and managed a slight smile. Bit by bit, he started telling the story of how he met Mia. He'd first come to The World by himself, just to escape from reality. I gathered that he'd thought that whenever he felt like there wasn't anywhere he belonged in the real world, there would be a place for him in the game. But his experience seemed to show that in truth, people who are unable to communicate in the real world still find it hard to do so in a virtual game, because even though it's a game, the others you meet there are still the temporary masks of real people. So, after spending not all that long in The World, Elk found himself just as alone as ever, with nowhere to fit in, and he was already thinking about quitting.

"That was when I met up with Mia," Elk said with a touch of embarrassment. "You know the item called Aromatic Grass?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I know about it. But . . . it's useless. It doesn't do anything."

"Oh yes it does!" Elk said, and his face shone like I'd never seen it do before. "Aromatic Grass is a magic item!"

"Like a charm?" I asked, puzzled.

"No! It's better than that!" He grinned. "It's an item for making friends!"

"Umm." *Hub?*

His explanation got a little hard to follow after that, but Elk gushed at me like a burst dam. For whatever reason, without ever finding out what it was used for, Elk developed a fancy for Aromatic Grass, and went around gathering it up for himself. It seemed that Mia adored the stuff—when he made her a gift of what he had gathered, she was surprisingly joyful. That was followed by days of running through fields with her, searching for more . . .

"I became friends with Mia with the help of Aromatic Grass." Elk smiled.

So, Elk and Mia were like-minded people with the same goal.
Just like Kite and me.

From the beginning I'd had a goal. I came to The World with the sole intent of finding out why Fumikazu had fallen unconscious. And when I'd found myself unable to go forward, I'd met Kite. Kite's reason for doing everything he did in The World was the same as mine. With him at my side, I was able to make myself do everything I knew I needed to do.

He rescued me.

And Elk discovered his goal through Mia, I thought.

"But . . ." Elk hesitated, then hung his head.

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To Elk, Mia was, I suppose, something greater than what Kite was to me. And lately she had started acting strange, and then disappeared . . .

"But now . . ." He couldn't get any more words out.

Now he's alone again. It made sense. "Elk . . ." I didn't know what to say that would do any good.

And like a punch to my gut when I was already down, Elk murmured, "She'll come back, right?"

He gazed out at the water again, and unable to find anything to say, I followed suit.

"I mean," he said, "Mia . . . wouldn't leave me alone." His voice was choked. "Mia was just tired before, right?"

Not knowing what else to do, I just nodded vaguely. "It's all right," I said. "Hey, Kite and I are here too, right?"

At those words, Elk turned to me in surprise.

"You're not alone," I said, smiling. "Doesn't sitting here waiting just make you lonely?"

Elk nodded and closed his eyes, but smiled slightly.

I wonder if things are okay this way . . . Elk seemed a little bit more hopeful now, but sitting there watching Elk as he looked out over the water again, I started feeling gloomy myself.

It seemed unlikely that Mia would suddenly go back to the way she was before. She kept getting stranger and stranger, as if she was linked to the degeneration of The World. As long as the game's situation didn't change for the better, I had a feeling that Mia wouldn't be fixed.

Not “get better” but actually “be fixed.”

Sitting there remembering the first time *I* had met Mia—when she showed me the scene of Orca being data drained—I watched the sun set on The World.



The last bell of the day echoed through the classrooms, and all at once the school overflowed with excitement and the babble of voices. Tomorrow was the long-awaited cultural festival.

Risa dragged me into the neighboring unassigned classroom to get my costume fitted with the other students unlucky enough to have been picked to dress up. The classroom wasn't being decorated for the festival—in fact, it wasn't used much at all, but the musty odor was the least of my worries as I pulled the white undergarment that I'd gotten from our costume coordinator, Nagashima, on over my uniform.

Our normal classroom would serve as the haunted house. Since we'd had to continue holding class there all week, we hadn't been able to set anything up ahead of time, so we'd have to stay all night to get the interior of our haunted house built and decorated. I have no clue what our homeroom teacher Mister Saitou was *thinking* when he'd proposed that idea to the principal. *Being stuck in this school in the middle of the night is NOT my idea of a good time!* For some reason the principal hadn't seen sense, but had allowed himself to be persuaded and given permission.

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If we just used this classroom as the haunted house and our normal classroom as the waiting room instead of the other way around, I thought, we could have been decorating it all week! Instead, the unassigned classroom-turned-waiting room had a large blueprint of the haunted house's layout sketched on its blackboard. From next door we could hear the sounds of boards and ornaments and whatnot being set up accordingly. The blueprint also recorded in detail where those of us who got to play the part of apparitions would have to stand.

"Hmm," Nagashima mused to no one in particular as she fixed my collar, "since ghosts are dead people, do they wear their kimonos with the right flap in front like you see the departed wear at funerals? Or do they wish they were still alive, so they wear their kimonos with the left flap in front like the rest of us?"

"Is this Nopperabo lady I'm playing a ghost?" I asked stupidly.

"You joking? Nopperabo is one of Japan's model phantoms, out to avenge her wrongful death!" said Risa, who was putting on a wig of long black hair. The bangs hung way down in front, completely covering her face.

"Risa, who are you supposed to be?" I asked timidly, and she named a popular classic horror movie. Even I, who had no interest in ghosts, had heard of it. It was a really famous movie.

"Looks good, huh?" Risa said, walking around with rigid motions. It was pretty disturbing to watch.

I donned the blank-faced mask that would make me Nopperabo, trying to see through the narrow, concealed slits in the eyeless face.

The fleeting glimpses I got of Risa through those slits made her look even scarier.

This really sucks . . . In all honesty, I did not at *all* care for ghosts. For that matter, I wanted nothing to do with this stupid haunted house.

Miho and Shouko laughed at me as I flinched when Risa moved in my direction. "Akira, you're supposed to be a ghost, so you'd better get a grip," Miho said. Her job for the festival was scaring guests using jelly. I envied her the job, given my feelings about ghosts. All she and her partner had to do was hide out in the darkness, without costumes even, and toss goo at people. If her partner didn't have to be a boy, I would've swapped myself in a second.

Perhaps I wasn't doing a very good job at concealing my dissatisfaction. Shouko peered at my mask and said, "All you have to do is squat down, and when people walk by you, turn around. Easy, right?"

"How'd we end up doing a Japanese haunted house again?" I asked Shouko through the mask. My voice echoed in there, and the air got stuffy fast.

"Japanese horror scares you right to the core, you know?" Shouko said. "Grudges and things like that are peculiar to our horror style. We're doing a haunted house *because* it's scary."

Well, she had a point. But at this rate I was much more likely to just screw things up than scare anyone.

The door to the waiting room slid open, and Ishii, the class committee member, came in. "Who can stay the night tonight?" he asked, all businesslike.

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Miho raised her hand. "Right here! I can stay!"

"Oikawa, and . . ." Ishii checked the memo he was holding. I'd heard it only recently from Shouko, but apparently Miho had fallen for the class committee member. He had short, black hair, which was unusual nowadays, and thick-lensed glasses. His face was ordinary, except for a doubled tooth like Mistral had. And he was short. Aside from that, you could say he was good-looking.

"Anyone else?" He scanned the room for any other volunteers, and our eyes met. "Ah, Hayami. You'll be staying too."

"Huh?" I yanked the mask off. *Did he just say what I thought he said?*

"You did stay after school once, didn't you?" Ishii said, raising an eyebrow.

"I can't," I responded instantly.

"Are your parents that strict?"

"It's not that," I said. "There's just no way I could personally handle being in this building at night." But right after I said that, I realized I should've just said my parents were strict. That would've settled the matter.

Ishii turned from me and addressed our other classmates again. "Hayami and . . . anyone else?"

"Hey! I didn't say I'd do it!" I protested indignantly.

"It's cool," Miho said, a smile on her face. "Let's build this thing together!"

The "volunteers" to stay overnight and everything together ended up being Miho the horror-lover; Risa, who lived nearby; myself;

Ishii; Nakamura, who had designed the haunted house layout; and several other boys. By evening we had pretty much everything in place, though we'd just barely started on the cosmetic decoration.

Eager to jump at any chance to get out of that place, I volunteered to go buy dinner. As I walked away from the school, I heard eager voices from many different classrooms, even though it was after sunset by that time. Leaving that all behind, I walked down the dark street alone. I sighed. "This sucks."

I heard a voice call out from not far behind me. "Hayami!"

I froze and then turned around cautiously. There was Hagiya, his guitar case slung over his shoulder.

"You're staying late?" he said.

The argument we'd had the other day still fresh in my mind, I glared and turned and wordlessly continued down the hill.

"H-hey, I'm sorry about the other day," Hagiya said, jogging to catch up and falling in step beside me. "I know I was in the wrong. Please forgive me." His apology was unusually polite, and he bowed his head. When I didn't respond, he tried a different tack. "Is your leg okay?"

I huffed. "Yes. And you don't need to worry yourself about it." I quickened my pace, eyeing the cemetery to either side of the hilly street we were walking down. I remembered hearing that this place was haunted. *Scary!*

From a little behind me but keeping pace, Hagiya kept trying to engage me in conversation. "It's dangerous to go out walking at night alone like this!"

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I wasn't up to the tough act tonight, so held my tongue.

"I'll go with you," Hagiya proposed. "Where to?"

I didn't want to admit it, but I was pretty spooked by the darkness and the whole horror thing. Maybe I should've called Risa on my cell and asked her to come with me, but I was almost beyond rational thought at that point. So even though I wasn't thrilled with the company, I was glad that he was at least someone I knew, and started walking beside him. I told him I was on my way to buy food at a nearby convenience store.

Glancing at the graves we were walking past, Hagiya asked, "Are you not good with scary stuff?"

I just stared straight ahead.

"Girls like that sure are cute."

"Are you making fun of me?" I said coolly.

"Not at all!" he protested. "Gee. Somehow I get the impression you don't like me." He looked over at me as I silently plodded along, then he changed the subject. "I heard you're doing a haunted house for the cultural festival."

"That's correct."

"Can I come?" he asked.

"Why are you even asking permission?"

"Because you don't like me."

I sighed deeply. So it had come around to that subject again. *If I tried to explain that that wasn't true at all, this guy probably wouldn't understand.* I glanced at Hagiya's face. He was looking at me uneasily. Maybe it was unkind to compare him to an animal, but his expression

reminded me of one Hana often had on her face when looking in my direction. "That isn't true . . ." The instant the words escaped my lips, I regretted them.

"In that case," he said, "would you come by the live performance at the festival?"

Hub? Uh, what exactly does that have to do with whether you can come see the haunted house? And what did he mean by "in that case"?

"I'm in the soft rock club, you know," he continued. "We're doing a show, so could you come see it?" Before I could answer, the convenience store came into view in front of us. "I'll wait for you out here, so go buy stuff," he said.

Hub?

"Wouldn't you be just as scared walking back alone?"

Again, I didn't answer.

Hagiya peered at my silent face, a smile forming on his. "Or maybe you'd prefer I go in with you?"

I shook my head. "I'll be back soon," I said, bowing my head to Hagiya, and went in to buy our dinner. When I came back out carrying a bag, Hagiya retrieved it from my fingers and turned on his heel, marching back the way we'd come.

"You don't have to do that!" I said, rushing to catch up with him and trying to take the bag back.

"Don't worry; I've got it," he said. "It's light. More importantly, what's your answer?" He smiled in my direction and kept walking.

"I-if I have time," I let out.

"Really? Then I'll dedicate a song to you."

"Excuse me?"

"One of the songs I perform will be just for you," Hagiya said. "I've already gotten permission from the other club members."

What am I supposed to say to that? I just looked at the ground in front of my feet, until Hagiya waved a hand in front of my face.

"We've arrived!" he said. "Here." Handing the bag back to me, he turned around and disappeared down the darkened street. Having missed my chance to thank him, I stood rooted to the spot until he was out of view.

The rest of the night, I found it difficult to concentrate as my classmates and I put the finishing touches on the decorations for the classroom. Just as Ishii and Nakamura—well-versed in horror—had imagined it, we managed to put together a full-blown Japanese haunted house by sunrise.

While the festival started bright and early, the haunted house wasn't scheduled to open until a bit later in the day, so I rubbed my sleepy eyes throughout the morning, guiding Mom and Kouta around while checking out the rest of the festival myself. But soon enough it was time for my classmates and I to get into costume, so I nervously got changed into Nopperabo.

Hagiya might come by, I kept thinking. Perhaps because of that, oddly enough, even waiting alone in the dark to scare guests as they came by didn't bother me.

Suddenly, I felt someone else's presence beside me. I was so surprised, I stepped backward, bumping into the screen behind

me, which made a loud clattering noise. "Nopperabo!" a nearby classmate hissed, and I managed to regain some of my composure.

Who is that? Getting up my courage, I leaned back over to see who had disturbed me, slipping off the muffling Nopperabo mask and quietly reaching out my hand. Fine dark hair met my fingers. I hurriedly withdrew my hand, and the figure bowed its head to me as I gaped.

"Sorry, this is just for a bit," the figure said. My face went red at the familiar voice, but Hagiya couldn't see that in the dimness.

"Why're you h—" I started, but he held up a quieting finger.

"I'm on the run," he whispered, glancing toward the entrance, which I could barely see between some obstacles.

"Who from?" I whispered back.

"You'll see."

A short time later, some girls from another high school barged into the room. I glared reproachfully at Hagiya next to me. *Why's he getting me involved in something like this?*

"C'mon, you've got to scare them!" Hagiya urged.

No time for questions, I thought, reluctantly putting the mask back on and waiting for the girls to appear in front of me. My heart pounded. Not because I couldn't tell what moment the guests would pass by, but because of an excited feeling that somewhat embarrassingly coursed through me. *Hagiya* was crouched next to me in a dark, confined space. So close that I could sense his body heat and the rhythm of his breath. I caught a whiff of a shampoo I wasn't familiar with—it must have been his.

I gripped the kimono collar flap at my chest tightly, and was so distracted that I missed the chance to scare the guests as they passed by.

"That was no good," Hagiya said, with a playful tone to his voice.

"Wh-wh-wh-who were they?" I stammered.

"They've been bugging me since this morning. I had to get away from them."

"Huh?"

"They think they're like my new biggest fans or something," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Getting mixed up with them would be a pain. You're a lifesaver."

Groupies? Of Hagiya?

"But at least I kept my promise by coming here to the haunted house!" he said.

Well, that's true, but it's not like I wanted you to come. More importantly, when I thought about how Risa or Miho could have spied me in this position, I felt nervous about how they'd rib me. "Anyway," I said, "please move along."

"Talk about cold!" he protested. "But thanks." The look he gave me was sincere, and then stood to continue through the haunted house like any other guest.

How serious is this guy? I wondered. After Hagiya left, I felt like a fool. I simply did not understand him.

Other guests came only intermittently, and we ended up shutting down early. *So much for all our hard work.* Miho and Risa, never



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ones to miss out on a fad, dragged me—reluctant—to the gym to see the live show. They kept bringing the topic of Hagiya up. *I guess they noticed after all . . .*

The lights were already down in the gym, so we found some open seats in the rear and sat down. I noticed my cell phone was vibrating in my pocket, so I quietly took it out and looked at it. The number wasn't familiar, but I instinctively knew it must have been Hagiya. I didn't remember telling him my number, but he must've had it since that one time I'd called him. *If I'd known this would happen, I would've found some other way to contact him . . .*

Miho noticed the scowl I wore as I sat pondering over my phone. "You're not going to answer?" she queried.

"Uh-uh." I put the still-buzzing phone back in my pocket. As I did so, a dazzling array of lights switched on and bathed the stage in color, and the show kicked off. Apparently our soft rock club's fame had spread even to other schools. The gym was flowing with parents and students I didn't recognize.

I wasn't familiar with their music, but it seemed pretty good. Honestly, I was surprised—I'd assumed they were amateurs, but they sounded almost like pros. Though I might have been more surprised if they were playing originals instead of cover tunes.

After the set was over, the other club members took to the stage's wings as Hagiya started playing a guitar solo. The constant cheers from the crowd abated, allowing the song to resound quietly through the packed gym. It was a love song I'd heard before, one that everyone there knew. All eyes were fastened on Hagiya onstage.

He's really playing it, like he said he would . . .

As the final chord struck, the audience roared. But I couldn't take it anymore. I fled outside alone.

The wind was cold on my cheeks. *It has nothing to do with me*, I thought. My cell phone started ringing again, but I ignored it and found Miho and the others to tell them I was going home, and I hurried on my way.

Hagiya, I don't understand you. And I feel like you'd act this way toward anyone you set your heart on, not just me. Am I wrong?



After a leisurely bath, I settled myself in my familiar chair. Opening up my e-mail program, I saw that I had one new message, from Chimney.

Long time no see! ◯_◯ I've had no luck catching you in The World, so here I am e-mailing you. ♪ Hey, did you hear the rumor about that beautiful PC girl? Y'know, there aren't that many people who've managed to catch sight of her, so we thought we'd go see for ourselves . . . Want to come with? Heh, it feels like I'm asking you to go on a picnic! Anyway, if you log in, drop me a line. Both Nova and I are free pretty much

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anytime. The place is Θ: Soft, Solitary, Tri Pansy. (^_~)

Brooding on the message, I donned the FMD. *Well, there's no e-mail from Kite saying he's made any progress . . .* "All right."

Touching down in The World, I warped to the Theta server root town Dun Loireag and sent an invite to Chimney and Nova. They quickly arrived, and once we got reacquainted, they led me to Θ: Soft, Solitary, Tri Pansy. As we made our way around the complicated jungle maze of a field, we ran into a trio of female player characters.

"Do you happen to know Gar?" they asked us.

"This is supposed to be the place," Nova answered, "but we haven't seen anyone else."

"If you like, we can help you search!" they replied. They had this annoying way of speaking in unison, and I could tell that speaking to them for long would get tiresome.

Over the party channel, Chimney asked, "Should we go with them?"

Nova frowned at the question. "I say no. Isn't it more fun to search on our own?"

"Hmm," Chimney said.

Honestly, no matter how annoying they were, I wasn't inclined to tag along with a group who were just looking for some other player. "Who knows how long it could take? I don't want to waste that much time. Let's refuse."

Rejected, the girls wandered off, and we traded wry smiles. "Why do you suppose they're so desperate?" I asked.

"Got me," Nova said.

"Gar . . ." I mused. "What kind of name is that, anyway? Some guy?"

At my question, Chimney and Nova looked at each other. "It's short for Gardenia. The rumor said she was a beautiful girl, so I assume she's at least female," Chimney said, smiling.

"But isn't it a little odd that girls are chasing after her?" I noted.

"Maybe it's like in Takarazuka theater where even male roles are played by women?" Nova said. "Anyway, we'll probably figure it out if we find her. Let's move on."

We nodded to Nova and moved forward into the dungeon. The interior was like a cave, and to be honest, we put more effort into spelunking than into searching for Gardenia.

"There's Grunty food here!" Chimney said excitedly, and I moved to follow him, but Nova suddenly stopped right in my path, motionless.

"Did you find the stairs?" I asked him. Then I peered over his shoulder—and saw a Long Arm with long, blonde hair. Perhaps to expose as little skin as possible, her body was covered in different layers of garments, all in white. The red eyes that peeked out through golden bangs looked our way dubiously.

"And you three are . . . ?" she inquired.

"Umm . . ." I said meekly. "We're—"

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"We're here for Grunty food," Nova interrupted. "Are you Gardenia?"

"That's right," she said, and her eyes widened as they caught sight of something behind us. Following her gaze, we turned around to see the girls who had bothered us earlier heading our way.

"You go down the stairs first," Chimney said brightly to Gardenia, then ran over to head off the other girls.

"Thanks," Gardenia said, then disappeared down the stairs.

Don't tell me, he's covering for her? Yes, that's exactly what Chimney was doing. He spun a yarn about how he'd seen Gardenia in some other section of the cave, and the girls bought it and left. Chimney came bounding back, and when we descended the stairs, we found Gardenia there waiting for us.

"I've caused you trouble," she said, bowing her head.

"Nah, don't sweat it," Chimney said, walking around her. "It's not easy being famous!"

She looked at him suspiciously.

"We saw the rumor about you on the BBS," Nova explained, smiling. "Of course we never thought we'd get to talk to you like this."

Gardenia made a complex face. "Actually," she said, then started telling her story. Some people had started a Gardenia fan club two months before, and it had been hard for her to enjoy playing the game ever since. Since she knew what it was like to be

pestered by strangers, she was reluctant to ask anyone else for help, she explained, bowing her head again.

Though the attention was uninvited, she was being harassed by people calling themselves fans . . . Coincidentally it was a situation very familiar to me, as I'd seen the same thing when Hagiya had taken refuge next to me in the haunted house.

Coming out of my reverie, I noticed that Gardenia was staring fixedly at my face. "Wh-what?" I said, looking over my shoulder.

"Well . . . you resemble a player character someone I know always talks about," Gardenia said.

"Someone you know?"

"Pay it no mind," she replied, thanking us politely and then warping out, vanishing before our eyes.

Since we'd done what we'd set out to do, we returned to Dun Loireag. As soon as we warped in, I stopped in shock—standing not far from the Chaos Gate was the long-lost Mia. *I need to talk to her! I need to talk to Mia!*

I hurriedly said my goodbyes to Nova and Chimney. "Thanks for taking me along today. See ya!"

As I turned to walk over to Mia, Nova restrained me. "Isn't that the PC from before?" he said

"You mean Mia?"

Nova looked at me with a worried expression. "It's best not to get involved with hacked characters."

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"Don't worry about it," I told him. "Though she is a bit odd . . ."

As if judging my words, Nova stared at me.

"It's a game," I said. A reluctant lie.

"That's true," Nova said, "but sitting in front of her computer is a real person, you know? I don't think it's safe to get mixed up with someone that weird."

I nodded and stared back.

"But it's none of my business, is it?" he said.

I shook my head. "I wouldn't put it that way."

After a long pause, Nova let go and moved aside. "All right, then."

"No need to worry," I assured him. "Thanks . . . see ya."

I as much as ran from Nova and Chimney.

No matter what it took, there was something I wanted to let Mia know before she disappeared. *And I absolutely have to let Elk know about this.*

"Who—who're you?" Mia said as I ran up to her.

"Who're you?" I parroted, shocked. *Mia's forgotten about me too?*

Her hand suddenly shot out toward my neck.

"W-wait!" I cried, but before I could say more, Nova appeared at my side and grabbed her hand.

"What the hell are you doing?" he spat out.

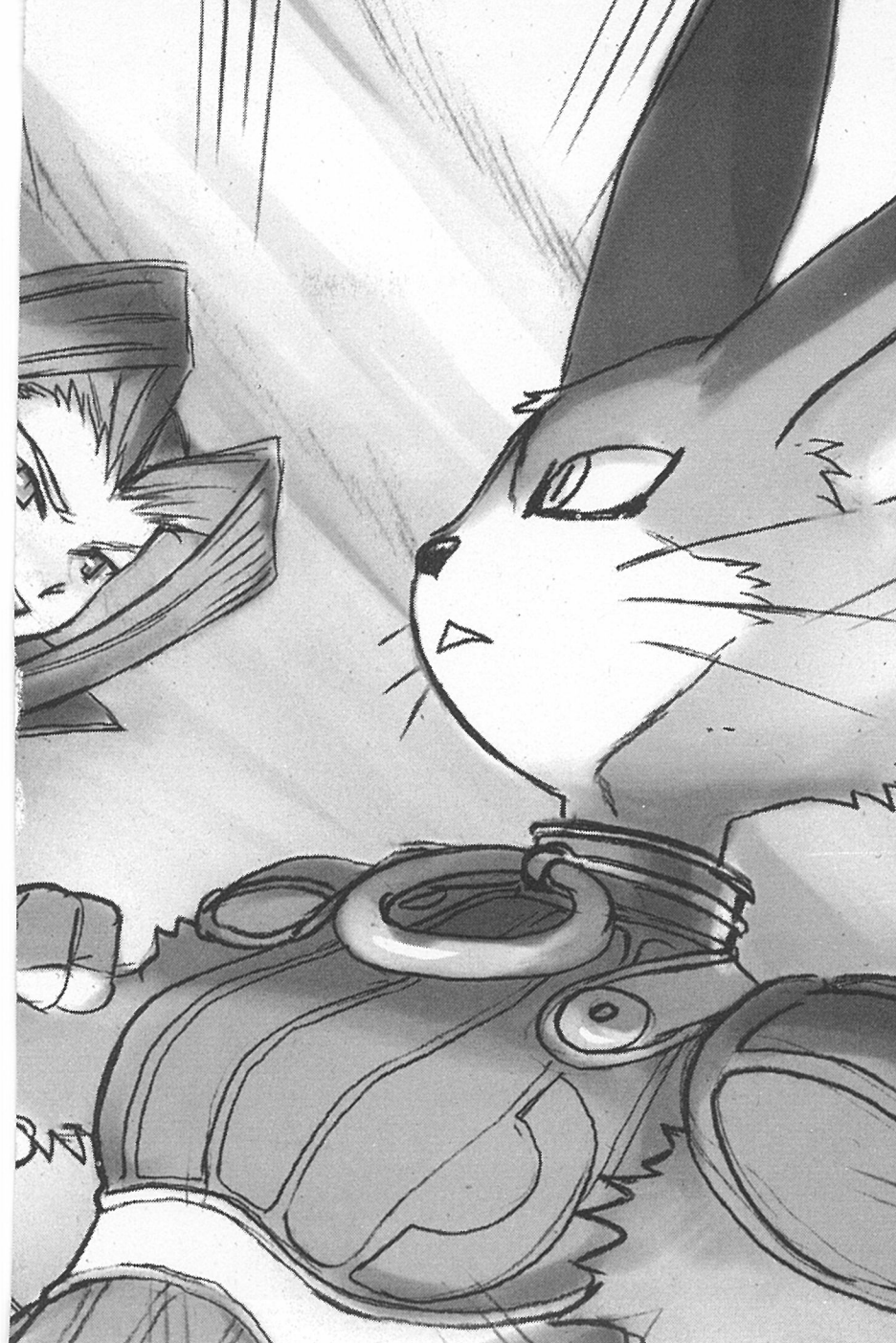
Mia paused and glanced at Nova silently.

Wanting to do something to defuse the situation, I spoke up.

"She's not doing anything! Are you, Mia?"

Mia ignored my words, but started muttering like she was talking to herself. "Elk—we were always together . . . and I thought he might have been with you now. Sorry . . . he—he and I . . ." Suddenly, she warped out and was gone. Only Nova, me, and an extremely awkwardness remained.





Gathering•

They gave us a day off of school to recover from the cultural festival, so morning found me camped out in front of my computer. The "new mail" indicator sounded, and the words that sprang in front of my eyes were unwelcome indeed.

The sender was Lios, and the subject was "Investigation request."

That's no request, I muttered internally. *That's an order.* The message said to come to the weapons shop in Fort Ouph on the Sigma server. I punched the *delete* button without a second thought.

I had had enough of being used.

I'll have to be careful not to get too close to the weapons shop on Σ server, I thought. *If Lios finds me, he's sure to force me to help.*

Starting up a new message, I typed an e-mail to Elk.

I have important information about Mia.
I'll be waiting at the Chaos Gate in Fort
Ouph.

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I watched the message send, then logged onto The World.



“Hi!”

I stepped back in shock right after warping in, because Mia appeared right in front of me, greeting me as if she had completely forgotten our encounter on the previous day. And unlike the previous day, she seemed her normal self.

“Uh, about yesterday—” I started to say, then noticed Elk running up behind her.

“Hey, Mia, wait up!” he called out.

What the heck is going on?

Not noticing my astonishment, Elk said to me, “I’m about to go to a field with Mia!”

He was in a really good mood, but I looked at Mia again. What she had said just before leaving the previous day, *Elk—we were always together . . . and I thought he might have been with you now. Sorry . . . he—he and I . . .* What was that supposed to mean? They were together *now*, weren’t they? I wanted to ask her about it, but I kept quiet. I didn’t think it was something I could bring up with Elk standing right there.

“Will you come with us?” Mia asked, peering at my face.

“What?” I said, taken aback.

“Elk, invite her,” Mia instructed, without even waiting for my answer. Elk seemed a little put out, but he must not have felt like arguing, because he invited me into their party.

I didn't know how to react, and Elk watched me silently. I could tell he wanted to be alone with Mia, but . . . if she suddenly disappeared again or something, Elk might go back into spaced-out mode. I couldn't risk waiting for a more convenient time, only to see that happen. Besides, if I spent some time with Mia, maybe I could find out what had been happening to her. So though I sensed Elk's discomfort, I accepted the invitation and was added to the party.

Mia gave us the coordinates of Σ : Outpouring, Vengeful, Sipping Bug, and we warped there. Upon our arrival we were met with pitch-black terrain that flamed as if magma was leaking through. The orange sky loomed with dark clouds and was rent by fissures through which peeked the familiar yet still strange progressions of luminescent characters. Perhaps because nowadays The World was at least somewhat contaminated everywhere you went, neither Elk nor Mia showed any sign of being perturbed.

"Do you always come here?" I muttered.

"Uh-uh," Elk answered, and his voice did show signs of unease. "This is our first time here."

We were both a bit puzzled, but Mia urged us on into the dungeon, which was one of those that were reminiscent of a human body. The minute we entered it, Mia narrowed her eyes and looked ahead. Elk and I stopped behind and craned our necks, looking past her but not seeing anything particularly noteworthy. Then Mia opened her mouth and whispered, "Plaird of the Seven Sisters, falling in love with a human, became a Shadowed One and was exiled from the Dark. Hence, her name came to be called Plaird the Fallen."

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Elk and I turned puzzled expressions toward each other. Then, just when it seemed Mia was about to speak again, she turned to Elk and gave a self-derisive smile. Then she turned to me and asked, "What did you think of that?"

I had no idea how to reply. "What did I think?" I replayed in my mind what she had said. *It sounded like some kind of story . . . What was that about the dark?* "Wait, was that—" I started, but Mia had already moved on ahead.

I trailed after her with Elk. "Is it always like this?" I whispered to him.

"Yeah, Mia always takes the lead for me," he said. Seeing my puzzled expression at that, he continued, "I've . . . got no sense of direction. It's better for me if she leads." He smiled bashfully.

As we went deeper into the dungeon, we kept tripping magical portals. When monsters appeared from them, it looked to me like Mia fought them to protect Elk. Reaching the lowest level, I instantly recognized the monster waiting for us there, clad in luminescent green hexes—it was unmistakably a Data Bug. Like a starving lion that had spied its prey, the monster stalked us slowly.

What do we do? I wondered silently.

"Here it comes!" Elk cried, and I gathered my wits and brandished my massive sword. If we worked together, the three of us might be able to time our escape correctly.

We can't give up!

Paying no mind to me or my sword, the Data Bug charged straight at Elk. Elk readied a panicked parry with his staff, and then—

Suddenly Mia appeared right next to the monster as it bore down on Elk, her sword buried deep in its neck.

But just now she was on the other side of us!

"Mia!" Elk cried joyfully, seeing her. Mia didn't react, but after a blank-faced mutter at the Data Bug, she ripped her sword from its flesh—and it fell, dead.

"What?!" I froze then, my sword raised, unable to comprehend what I had just seen. *With a single blow, and without a data drain . . .*

Mia, rooted to the spot, raised her eyes to the ceiling. Like a creature possessed, her mouth opened listlessly and began spilling out words. "At her wanderings' end, she settled in seclusion in Arche Haokar. However, those days may not last. A reunion may come, or may not. Plaird's form vanishes at the coming of the sign of the Wave." Her voice was quiet, but the sound of it reverberated throughout the spacious chamber.

"Huh?" *Is that more of what she was saying before?* I immediately looked back through the log, comparing these words to her previous strange utterance, and made a note of both.

"Elk," Mia murmured, and stretched out her hand as if to touch him—but suddenly, the air coiled and warped around her body, and she vanished.

"Mia?" Elk whispered, blankly staring in amazement at the spot she had vacated. He stared for a long time, like his soul had been snatched . . .

Taking him by the hand in that dazed state, I led Elk out of the dungeon and back to town. Soon after we got there he logged





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off, still in shock, and since it was lunchtime, I too left The World behind me.



The living room downstairs was so quiet it was scary. Mom had gone to visit Fumikazu in the hospital, so I'd be eating a lonely lunch. With the note I'd written while playing in one hand, I sank deep into thought.

"Dark . . . Wave . . ."

Those words Mia had muttered had to be a fragment of the *Epitaph*. The word "dark" had similarly arisen in the fragment Kite had told me. The way he'd said it had seemed significant, so I remembered it well. The phrase "sign of the Wave" was in the *Epitaph* excerpt Wiseman had sent us, and Fidchell had also used the word "Wave."

I went back to my room and printed out all the information I had gathered so far. Harald's Note that I'd heard from Kite, the fragments of the *Epitaph*, the excerpt we'd received from Wiseman . . . and the words that Mia had said. I looked them over, turning them around and around in my head to see if I noticed anything new, but on my own, I wasn't making any progress.

I wish I had someone to think this over with me . . .

Then I thought of just the right person. Someone who, even if I told her all this, probably wouldn't come to The World, but who would be sure to take an interest.

With trepidation I opened my cell phone, pushed the buttons, and waited for the sound of her voice.

"Hey. What's up?" Asaoka answered the phone, the worry evident in her voice.

"Sorry to call so suddenly," I said. "There's something I'd like to discuss."

Asaoka asked in an even more serious voice, "Did something happen in the club again?"

"No, no," I assured her. "This time it's about the *Epitaph of Twilight* we talked about that one time. Do you mind?" I had a feeling it would be better not to try to do this over the phone, so I asked her to meet me somewhere.

Over fast food at a joint near the station, I filled her in on the details. Asaoka bit into the subject with even more gusto than I had imagined she would. I gave her simple explanations of things like Mia's irregular character and The World's original programmer, Harald, and passed along the data I had collected.

Asaoka looked the printouts over with deep interest. "Can I borrow these?"

"Of course," I said. "That's why I brought them."

Asaoka nodded. "I'll do a little investigating."

"Thank you," I said sincerely. "I need the help."

Even while we made small talk, she scoured through the data with a grave expression on her face.



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The next couple days were quiet, until I checked my e-mail one night and the name of a new message's sender was so unexpected I blurted it out loud. "Balmung?"

We need to talk. Be at the Chaos Gate in Fort Dufh.

Why me? I wondered, cocking my head. I couldn't remember ever exchanging member addresses with Balmung. *His crony Lios probably told him what it was.*

I decided to meet with him anyway, and as I waited at the Chaos Gate for Balmung to arrive, Kite warped in. "Hey, Kite!" I said. "I got this weird e-mail from Balmung saying he needed to speak with me."

Kite took a long, hard look at my face. "Really? Oh, by the way, Balmung's on our side now."

Hub? The news came so suddenly, I raised my voice. "Whaaat? Wasn't he working with *Lios*? He acts so high and mighty, and mean . . ."

Then I sensed that someone had warped in behind me. Kite's eyes also shifted in that direction. "Ah, Balmung," he said.

"Waugh!" I cried, flinching to the side.

"BlackRose!" Balmung called out.

I spun around and answered him with a firm tone. "What is it?"

"I'm sorry for everything," he said. "Before."

I was floored. “Wh-wh-what’d you say? Stop freaking me out!” But there Balmung was, standing right in front of me with an apologetic look on his face, and my vision swam dizzily. On one hand, I was happy that he finally understood what was going on, but on the other hand, the apparent straightforwardness of his apology kind of creeped me out. But as I was about to open my mouth and see what words came out, a loud, buzzing wail rang through the town.

Balmung and I stared around in shock. Up until this point, things like that had only happened in fields and dungeons, never a town!

But as if paying the noise no mind, Kite murmured, “This feeling . . . It’s Aura.”

“Hold on,” I protested. “What the heck are you talking about?”

“I heard Aura’s voice,” Kite said, growing more and more serious. “She said she was waiting in Λ: Merciless, Grieving, Furnace. The girl is calling to me!”

“The girl?” I asked dumbly, not immediately associating *Aura* and *the girl*.

“The girl who gave me the bracelet—Aura,” Kite said patiently. “Anyway, let’s try going to Λ: Merciless, Grieving, Furnace.”

“I’ll bet she wants the segment you got the other day,” I said.

Balmung looked confused. Kite had said he was on our side now, but I guessed he hadn’t yet told Balmung all the details.

We headed to Λ: Merciless, Grieving, Furnace immediately. Warping there went off without a hitch, but the ground there was so red I couldn’t tell what patches were contaminated and what ones

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weren't. The bits of luminescent code that peeked out here and there were yellow in this field. The fissures in the black sky yawned open like huge, eerie maws.

While avoiding as many magical portals as we could, we entered the dungeon. It was vast—Kite must have been in quite a hurry, since he expended a Fairy's Orb, an item that displayed unexplored parts of the map. We moved deeper and deeper inside.

Is the place Aura's waiting for us on the lowest level after all?

We descended to floor B3, and the lack of magical portals anywhere on the level was striking. Without encountering a single one, we made our way to the lowest room. Its entrance was a door clouded by a purple mist.

Will we really get to speak with Aura this time? Will we get to ask her what we've wanted to ask for so long, about how to save the coma victims?

Right on Kite's tail, I adjusted my grip on my controller and plunged through the purple mist.

And there she was. Aura was floating in midair, waiting for us.

Kite paused and swiveled, looking back the way we'd come.

"Huh?" I said.

Before I could turn around to look as well, Kite waved me off. "It's nothing," he said, turning back around, and as I stared at him quizzically, he seemed about to say something to Aura. But as he opened his mouth, a crimson sphere suddenly floated up from his chest—Aura's segment. It wafted upward, and she absorbed it.

"Ah," I breathed. In the heart area of Aura's translucent body, a red glow became visible.



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"What's this?" Balmung said, his loud tone betraying his nervousness.

Kite and I kept looking at Aura. She seemed about to speak, and Kite slowly approached.

Then suddenly our ears were assaulted by a deafening noise.

The shout of Cubia.

A pale root suddenly thrust upward from the ground between Kite and Aura, rapidly expanding to dominate our field of vision. It was like we were deliberately kept from ever touching Aura. She was almost within reach, but this root blocked our path.

"Ah!" I cried.

And Aura disappeared.

"Please, wait!" Kite shouted, but in vain. The room was swallowed in darkness, and I recognized the large bracelet shape that rose up from before our feet. My breath caught. An enormous root stretched up and around over our heads.

Before our eyes, Cubia appeared. "It's . . . it's that thing again!" I cried.

Balmung, who had never seen Cubia before, hefted his blade and glared at it. "It's big . . . *too* big! Can we possibly defeat *that*?" he breathed, and gulped.

"We have to, or it'll defeat *us*!" I cried in response.

"It's growing," Kite muttered beside me.

Growing? I realized Kite was right. It was definitely at least two times as large as it had been the first time we saw it.

"Here it comes!" Balmung bellowed, and we readied our weapons. Kite the Twin Blade, me the Heavy Blade, and Balmung the Blademaster.

I never thought it would come down to this . . . We were all fighters. We didn't have anyone to run recovery! But the combat was beginning, and it was far too late to do anything about that. Still, I did what I could to give us as many advantages as possible, spending some items I carried to strengthen everyone's defense power and attributes.

The Cubia Core—a pale, globular monster masked by roots—appeared in front of us. All three of us attacked at once, but Cubia Core had physical tolerance. Combining charms with spells I had ill practice in wielding, we whittled away at its hit points merely bit by bit. Cubia itself used its roots to land massive area attacks, and each time one hit, we had to individually use items to restore our hit points.

Three varieties of monster spawned around us—Kill Gomoras, Varias Gomoras, and Repth Gomoras. They were all smaller than Cubia Core.

"These ones are first!"

At Kite's words, we each chose a Gomora and destroyed it. However, no matter how many times we crushed them, the Gomoras respawned after a set interval. It became a repetitive cycle of area attacks, Gomora slaying, and Core strikes. We were forced to fight a battle that seemed like it might just keep stretching on and on.

Because not one of us had items that restored hit points and skill points at the same time, Kite voluntarily took on the duty of

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recovery, but our recovery items soon started to run out. Our skill points drained, unable to use our attack skills, we were reduced to whaling away with our weapons like automatons.

Kite's name in the status bar blinked red, a sign that his hit points were about to run out. I was flustered, but at my side Balmung rapidly exchanged his equipment and cast recovery magic on Kite. Once Kite's hit points recovered to a safe margin, Balmung reequipped his original gear.

"I always carry an extra set of equipment that lets me use Repth," Balmung explained. "Its defense level is low, though, so I never leave it on for long."

Balmung of the Azure Sky . . . Is this a sign of the true playing skill of one of the Descendants of Fianna?

"This will finish it!" Balmung cried, stabbing mightily at the core, and Cubia itself howled as if in pain.

As I watched it slowly fall into the darkness, I thought, *Please don't come back up . . .* But as if just to spite my wish, Cubia suddenly rose up and merged into the color-inverted sky, vanishing.

It ran again . . . As I looked up at the spot where Cubia had been absorbed into the sky, I suddenly thought, *What if . . .* "Hey," I said. "What if Cubia's stopping you from meeting with the girl?"

Kite tilted his head. "Stopping me?"

I nodded. "Doesn't it seem that way, when you think back on our encounters with it? But it always runs away in the end—that's the part I don't get."

"But then," Kite said slowly, "if Aura and I meet, what will happen? Why is Cubia interfering?"

"Like there's any way I'd know that!" I cried. "Think about it on your own!"

"So," Balmung interjected, joining the conversation, "what exactly *was* that thing?"

Good grief! "I'm trying to tell you I don't know!"

"I see," Balmung said dubiously.

In the end we were again denied our chance to speak with Aura, so we returned to Carmina Gadelica.

"Cubia's getting stronger," Kite muttered, echoing what he'd said before the battle had begun. "It's growing just like we are." It definitely had gotten bigger. And even though we'd gotten stronger as well, we weren't really able to defeat Cubia Core.

I'd never realized that a battle without a party member dedicated to recovery would be so trying. Though my appreciation was belated, I once again realized the importance of a Wavemaster—of Mistral.

"The corruption's getting steadily worse," Kite said. "We may not be able to go on fighting separately like this."

Unsure what Kite was getting at, I asked, "What do you mean?"

He paused. "Lios."

"Lios?" I said scornfully, but Kite just looked at me and nodded.

"Yeah," he said. "I was thinking maybe he could lend us a helping hand."

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"But . . . *that* Lios?" I cried. "Are you serious?"

"I think Lios also wants to get this world back to normal," Kite said. "I'm pretty sure he'll help us out."

I could hardly agree. *Kite . . . You're the one who's being taken advantage of the most.*

When the two of us fell silent, Balmung cut in. "My opinion is the same as yours."

Balmung too! "It doesn't seem to me that Lios is likely to cooperate though," I said, giving voice to my honest opinion.

Kite smiled. "It's all right," he said. "Even Lios should understand. I mean, well . . . as an adult, his pride's sure to get in the way, so he probably won't say up front that he'll join us."

Still . . . that Lios? I pondered. Lios probably *needed* Kite. After all, there was that e-mail I'd gotten from him the other day about investigating an area. If Lios intended to use us, it seemed fair play for us to use him too. "I guess we do need internal CC Corp. information . . ." I mused, and somehow I found myself convinced to make a deal with the devil.

"The problem is," Balmung said to me, "whether Lios will accept Helba or not."

"Huh," I said, "you've got a point there." We pondered possible scenarios, and then I recalled a trick my friends had pulled on me at school the other day. *A variation of that might just work . . .*



It was our first day back after the festival. I was in the classroom at the beginning of our noisy lunch break, and Risa and Shouko asked me if I would tell Miho to meet them in the cafeteria to eat. I told them she'd already left, saying she was going to meet them on the roof, but they simply said they felt like eating in the cafeteria that day. It seemed a little strange to me, but since I was the fastest runner of the group, I headed up toward the roof to see if I could head Miho off before she got there.

I should note at this point that I had no idea I was being tricked.

When I got to the roof without meeting her on the way, the first thing I saw there was Hagiya. Just Hagiya, no one else. I went ahead and looked all over the roof for Miho, but of course I didn't find her . . . and in the end I spent more than half my lunch break talking to Hagiya.

He said he always ate his lunch on the roof when the weather was that nice out. Not having known that at all beforehand, I totally fell for Risa, Shouko, and Miho's trap.



If we don't come right out and call him, but set things up like that, it might just work . . . "Tsk! Fine then," I said. "I'll call the two of them, and you handle it from there."

"Call them? How?" Balmung asked curiously.

"Just watch me." I winked.

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"However you do it, the problem will be *after* you call them," Kite muttered.

"Did you say something?" I said, pretending not to hear. *After I call them, something should work out anyway.*

"Nothing," Kite said.

"Okay, then!" I said, rubbing my hands together. "I'll e-mail you once I'm ready." I logged out.



The World's BBS. This would be my first post, but I didn't want to start a new thread. I didn't want too many people noticing it.

I scanned through possible threads to use. "Aha!" I cried, finding one that looked promising. I scanned through the whole thing. It had been neglected. Two or three off-topic posts had been made, and then it had stagnated.

There was no way I could pass it up. I was sure no one was watching it, and even if they saw my post, they probably wouldn't understand what it said. Paying close attention to the wording, I filled out the posting form.

The thread title was *Hackers*.

For the post title, I typed in "To the Queen of the Dark,"—the words in the *Epitaph of Twilight* that referred to Helba. And the listed poster was, of course, BlackRose.

The content of the post was just one sentence: "I await you in Paradise."

The place where even broken NPCs could be at ease without getting debugged—the Net Slum inhabitant Thea had called it Paradise. It was a creepy place, but it seemed to me that “Paradise” was a perfect word for a place you could go to get away from system administrators. I had taken a shine to the word, so I used it in the post.

My thoughts were along these lines: Lios for sure wouldn't be too thrilled about us being in league with Helba. So, what if we used the BBS to get in contact with her? It would probably bug the heck out of Lios, and he'd come take a look. Even if he deleted the post, I was betting that Helba had the skills to still read what had been written there.

After the post went through, I sent e-mails to Kite and Balmung.

Get in touch with me once you're ready.
Like I said—just leave it to me! I'll be
waiting at the A server Chaos Gate. Oh, but
before that, take a peek at the BBS. See
you later!



I replenished my recovery items and whatnot at the item shop, then arrived at the Chaos Gate just in time to see Kite warp in.

“Helba's one thing, but I wonder if Lios will really come,” Kite said uneasily.

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I nodded. "The plan's perfect! I am a woman, after all!" Not exactly sure why I'd said that, I grinned at Kite. "Anyway, Net Slum. A: Pulsating, Truth's, Core, right?" Those were the keywords for going straight to Net Slum.

We waited a while to see if Balmung would show up, but it didn't look like he would, so Kite and I decided to go on ahead.

Having arrived in Net Slum, we started walking around aimlessly.

"Are you planning on contacting Helba?" said a voice from behind us, and when we turned around, there stood Lios, his arms folded imperiously. "Well, whatever it is the two of you are up to, I'm afraid I had to delete that post. Poof. So I'm sorry to bring you the sad news that she won't be here."

"Oh yeah?" I chided him softly, and Lios frowned.

"The hackers—they're having a good laugh!" he barked. "They find the current state of affairs to be quite amusing. What dealings do you intend to have with them? I must know—tell me!"

Kite started walking toward him. "Are you just toeing the company line?" he asked.

Lios was taken aback. "What?"

"Lios, you of all people should know by now," Kite continued, "that the problems have nothing to do with Helba."

"What do you know?!" Lios shouted. "What, you think that bracelet makes you some kind of hero now? Don't make me laugh! Fine, keep wearing that trinket for all I care. That abominable item will play no part in my restoration of this system!"

Kite shook his head. "Lios, that's not what I mean at all. What I'm trying to say is that if we want the same final outcome, we should work together."

"I do *not* work with hackers!" Lios spat.

Watching them argue was really starting to tick me off. I got right in Lios' face and let him have it. "You pighead! Your stubbornness makes me wanna bust open your head just to see if there're any brains in there!"

"If he weren't so thick-skulled, I'd have done that long ago," we heard a voice say, and then Helba warped in.

Lios jumped back in shock. "Helba! How did you—?"

Helba flashed him a smile. "There is so much of significance to be gleaned from a single deleted post. Did you actually think I would pass up such a juicy tidbit as that? Deleting messages that have clues pointing toward the truth? Truly shameful. Even a pighead like you can't be completely ignorant of what's going on around here . . . can you?"

"Just because I didn't rebuke *her* doesn't mean *you* have permission to call me a pighead." Lios sniffed, turning and looking away. Maybe he was tired of all the "pighead" comments.

"Then why don't you prove to us you're *not* a pighead?" Kite said, pouring salt on the wound.

"Whaaat?!" Lios spun and glared at Kite.

"The players who fell into comas while playing the game," Kite said, interjecting a bit of reality into the conversation, "still haven't woken up. While we stand around calling each other names, they're out there suffering. What we oughta be doing right now—"

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"All right," Lios snapped. He paused, and looked Kite and me in the face. Then he said, "If only to get you to stop pestering me, I'll work with you. On one condition—that you prove to me how serious you are by retrieving a virus core from the lowest level of the dungeon at Σ : Sorrowful, Sweltering, Arena."

Eh? But we've been doing that kind of thing for ages! Maybe Lios has just realized, deep down, that joining forces is the best thing to do. My assessment of him inched upward. "Piece of cake!" I answered firmly—even though I wasn't the one who had the bracelet.

"However," Lios continued, "you must do it without using the data drain. That is the sole condition under which I will join forces with the likes of Helba."

"Don't be ridiculous!" I cried. "What're we supposed to do if a Data Bug suddenly shows up?" *What's he thinking? Does he want more coma victims?* My estimation of him slipped back down a notch.

"Understood," Kite said. "I agree."

"What!" I shouted. "Please tell me you're joking."

Kite just kept looking straight at Lios. "If I do it," he said, "you'll work with Helba?"

"If, and only if, you fulfill my condition," Lios said, then turned tail and gated out.

"Getting through to a pighead is nearly impossible," Helba said. "Show him how serious you are." She gated out as well, leaving just the two of us standing there alone.

This is nuts. "This is getting totally out of hand," I said.

"But it's all we can do," Kite said. "You scared?"

Of course I'm scared! I wanted to scream, but if I ran now, I'd be giving up on Fumikazu. I shook my head and bluffed for all I was worth. "Heck no. So let's get going already!"

Kite smiled, and we headed for Fort Ouph together. Along the way Balmung finally showed up, so we explained the situation to him and Kite invited him into our party.

"Did you see the e-mail just now?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I saw it earlier, but my part-time job ran late. I'm sorry I couldn't be there."

The sight of Balmung apologizing meekly was creepy, but it was a step in the right direction. *Even so, part-time job? Is he one of those guys who scrimps away on a part-time salary so he can play games the rest of the day?*

"Let's go then," Kite said, rubbing his right arm uneasily. He probably wasn't too keen on the prospect of not using the bracelet.

When we warped into the field, Lios appeared before us. "You understand my *condition*, right?" he said. It annoyed me how much emphasis he put on the word.

"Yeah. I won't use the data drain here," Kite said, his smile not faltering. "And when we get back, you keep your promise."

Lios responded only with a long, hard stare, then gated out wordlessly. *What a coward!* I wondered how much to bet that he wouldn't keep his end of the bargain.

It was true that we'd gotten tired of his orders and rebelliously ignored him and struck out on our own, but that was only after we'd cooperated in several investigations for him, so he could have

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picked a better way to go about this. *For that matter, what's the deal with the condition he picked?*

My heart pounding, we cautiously advanced through the dungeon full of ruins. Sure enough, on floor B5 we encountered a Data Bug. "Look! There one is! Now what do we do?" I cried, but the answer was obvious.

We fight.

As we readied our weapons, Lios suddenly appeared behind us again. "Yes, now what will you do?"

Kite just turned around and stared at Lios for a moment. Then he looked back at the Data Bug and said, "Let's go!"

The three of us attacked.

Does he plan on not using the bracelet even if things get dicey? I wondered, looking at Kite uneasily.

Slashing at the Data Bug, I noticed something strange. "Huh?" This was supposedly a Data Bug, but for some reason its hit point meter was decreasing like any normal monster's—even though Data Bugs never lost hit points before being data drained! *Is this some kind of test?*

"Rai Drive!" I cried, trying a thunder element Heavy Blade skill, and—the Data Bug was dead. "You've gotta be kidding me!" *Why?* I was almost hysterical.

"Why didn't you use the data drain?" Lios critiqued Kite. "Are you that eager to become coma victims?"

"Look here, you!" I shouted at him, all motivation to use tact now out the window. "You're the one who said not to use it in the

first place, so what the heck are you talking about? But this so-called Data Bug—we've fought things way stronger than that! As if you didn't know!"

"Lios knows," Kite said calmly.

"Eh?" I said.

Balmung seemed surprised as well. "You know?" he asked Lios.

What does that mean?

"When we were fighting Cubia," Balmung said slowly, "you were watching?"

Wait. So the reason Kite turned around to look the other day . . . "You mean, where Aura—"

"I know nothing of that!" Lios interrupted. "Besides, the Data Bug you just defeated was only an impostor I created. If it were real, that lightning thing wouldn't have worked. Don't get too carried away."

An impostor?

"One way or another, I had a feeling that would be the case," Kite said. "I know this game is important to you too. There's no way you'd let something that dangerous happen."

As I looked at Kite's calm face, I breathed a sigh of relief. "Why didn't you say that in the first place? You about gave me a heart attack."

Helba chose that exact moment to warp in right in front of us. "Waah!" I cried, stumbling back. *How come Lios and Helba keep popping in and out like that? I really am gonna have a heart attack!*

Helba stared at Lios. "You lose, Lios," she said simply, then just grinned.

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Lios merely seemed grumpy. "I lost all right . . . completely!" he said, grimacing. "That wasn't any fun at all."

Helba gave him another smile. "Lios, since it's come to this, I feel I must let you know—the higher-ups at CC Corp. have begun to take actions that are nothing short of gross malfeasance."

Lios looked shocked.

"Until now the government has been relatively sympathetic," Helba continued, "but their patience has run dry and the various ministries involved are making arrangements to announce that the full responsibility for the recent disasters lies with CC Corp. Forewarned of this, CC Corp. higher-ups are moving to protect themselves."

Hopefully out of earshot, I whispered to Kite, "Who is Helba?"

"A really good hacker or something," Kite replied with a shrug, frowning at me.

"Duh! I know that!" I hissed. "That's not what I meant—ugh, whatever." I turned my attention back to the conversation between Helba and Lios.

"To protect themselves?" Lios was saying.

Helba nodded. "They intend to wipe out the evidence—to destroy the physical servers, consigning this world and any leads we have toward recovering those we have lost to eternal oblivion."

"Ridiculous!" Lios protested.

"And when it happens," Helba said, "you at CC Corp. will just claim it's the work of terrorists or hackers again."

Kite forced his way between the two. "Even if they do that, it won't accomplish anything!" he said. "It won't stop the network from getting more contaminated!"

Helba inclined her head toward Kite and smiled. "That's right, and CC Corp. already knows that. But the network contamination means nothing to them—all they care about is saving their own public image. If we don't take action before they do something foolish . . ."

Lios just stared at her.

Kite turned to face him. "I held up my end of the deal, Lios," he said. "But I'm not going to keep you from backing out now if you want."

"What an unpleasant child," Lios said. "Fine. I will keep my promise. I'll cooperate with *all* of you." And he warped out.

Man, that Lios guy sure isn't easy to work with. Just like any typical, hard-headed grownup. But . . . this means that both Lios and Helba are on our side.

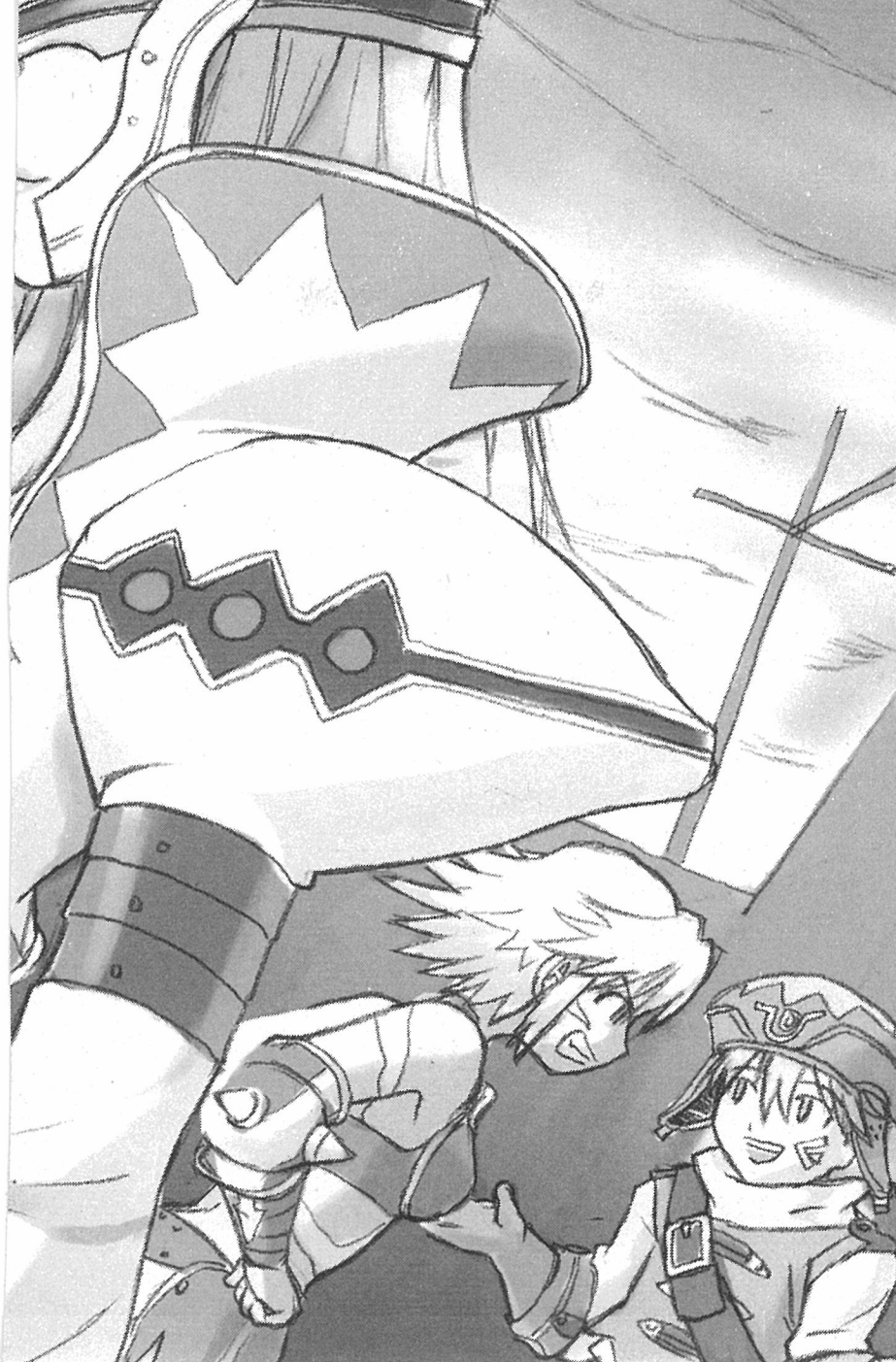
"It all starts here," I whispered.

"Yeah," Kite echoed eagerly. "It all starts here."

I smiled at Kite. Now we were all one group, all of us who were working to solve the same problem. Kite, who possessed an irregular item; Lios, who was trying to fix the system abnormalities from the CC Corp. side; Balmung, who had been working for Lios; and Helba, who had been Lios' nemesis for a long time. As long as each of us gave our all to this effort, and shared what we knew . . .

"It starts here," I said again, and the words rang with a bright hope in my mind.





The Outside and the Inside

I heard you managed to get Lios and Helba to cooperate.

I'm amazed.

"And Helba, Queen of the Dark, has raised finally her army.

Apeiron, King of Light, beckons . . .

At the base of the rainbow they meet.

Against the abominable Wave, together they fight."

It's just like a stanza of the *Epitaph*. Now . . . it's still unknown what the origin of the "abominable Wave" is . . . but with Lios' and Helba's help, we should be able to squeeze some truth out of the situation.

All thanks to you and Kite.

Good work.

hack // Another Birth

Wiseman's e-mail made me feel a bit out of sorts. *Thanks to me?* Sure, I tricked them into showing up in the same place, but it was Kite who'd done the most to secure Lios' cooperation.

Another e-mail was from Kite, saying there was a rumor on the BBS that a certain area was cursed, so I logged in and went there with him, but we were back at the Chaos Gate before long.

"Just another Data Bug again," I muttered. "If everything people wrote about on the BBS actually happened, Lios would probably throw a permanent fit."

Kite smiled wryly. "True, true."

The BBS had mentioned some mysterious phenomenon, but when we'd gotten there it was just a Data Bug on the lowest level of the dungeon. Once upon a time Data Bugs were something to worry about, but with how contaminated the game was now, I was totally used to them. "So, what do we do now?" I yawned.

"Hmm," Kite pondered, and his gaze shifted back to the Chaos Gate behind me. I figured someone must have shown up, so I turned around.

"So this is where you were!" Balmung ran over, his airy wings fluttering. "There's a field I just remembered the keywords for that Orca had said had a strange room somewhere in it."

"Where, where?" Kite and I cried, almost in unison.

"Σ: Resonating, False, Grasslands," Balmung said.

Kite and I looked at each other. A strange room could lead to more clues about the *Epitaph of Twilight*. "Strike while the iron is hot!" I said. "Let's not waste any time."

the_outside_and_the_inside

We hit the ground running after warping into the field, speeding through a contaminated prairie and down into an ancient castle-type dungeon. We followed Balmung to the lowest level, taking the shortest route.

What we found there seemed way out of place for the depths of a dungeon—a strange-looking house that had a log roof, with a white fence enclosing a garden of four withered trees. Several stopped clocks hung beside the door, and on the front path lay a food dish and water bowl—and a collar connected by a rope to one of the trees. *For a dog or something?* But the place was deserted—there was no sign of life.

“Are these some kind of ruins?” I muttered to no one in particular, and we walked through the front gate. As soon as we entered the yard, text started appearing in the game log.

```
Wave soars and shrouds the eyes.  
No means to fight an omnipresent force,  
The shadowless ones just grieve.  
Why must it be a Wave?  
Divide, if it would just . . .  
Then retaliate, we may.
```

There was no mistaking it; this was an *Epitaph* fragment.

Kite looked up at the low, stark white sky, and murmured, “Harald . . .”

“What, do you know something?” I said.

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"No," Kite said hesitantly, then turned to me. "I was just wondering what he's trying to tell us."

All three of us were wondering the same thing.



After school the next day, restlessness kept me from putting my all into tennis practice—I just couldn't wait for it to be over with. I reflected that I'd felt that same restlessness since the incident with Natori and her cronies picking on me had been resolved. I kept pondering when would be a good time to talk to Asaoka about the fragment of the *Epitaph of Twilight* that we'd gotten the day before. But that question was answered for me once practice had ended, since she snagged me while I was rushing to leave.

"There's something I need to ask you," she said.

A little taken aback by Asaoka being the one to approach me first, but replied, "S-sure. What's up?"

"Not here, though," she said, her eyes shifting around to take in our surroundings.

We were alone in the storage room, where I'd put away the last of the nets and balls, and it seemed unlikely anyone else would have a reason to come back. "I don't think anyone will bother us here," I said. "Did something happen?"

"Umm . . ." Asaoka still seemed unsure. I wondered what she had to say that she was so worried about people overhearing. After surveying the area in silence once more, she peered at my face and

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said in a low voice, "Does what you're investigating have to do with people falling into comas while playing The World?"

"Huh?" I gasped.

"Well, the game might not be the cause, but there's a rumor going around."

I didn't know how to respond. If I said nothing, it would only confirm her suspicion. But I couldn't think of anything else I could say that wouldn't sound like an obvious evasion. And the fact that she was working with me on the *Epitaph* riddle strongly tempted me not to hide anything from her—but I didn't want her pitying me for Fumikazu's sake.

As I stood there frozen by indecision, Asaoka's gaze never wavered. "If that *is* the reason you're investigating it," she said, "don't worry about me getting scared off by that or anything. But if it's true, it might help cast a different light on the issue."

"A different light?"

"That's right. I think it might help us to make sense of it, to understand it."

She was just too willing and honest a collaborator for me to keep things from anymore. So I told her. I walked my bike next to her on the way to the station, and I told her everything, even about Fumikazu and the *Epitaph* fragment we'd gotten the day before. She didn't bat an eye, and didn't drown me in sympathy, but was optimistic about our chances of making real progress on the investigation front. And once we parted ways, I felt relieved to have found someone else with whom I could share my secret.

•hack // Another Birth



That afternoon when I started up my computer and checked my e-mail, I found a message from Wiseman with the subject line "To all involved in the operation."

The "operation"? Is that the scale this is on now? I thought, opening the message.

Based on our prior conversation, we have determined not to use the jammer program on an area itself, but instead seek to isolate those areas in which the Wave shows signs of existing. Based on the analysis of those areas, we will consider what strategy will most effectively defend against the enlargement of the contamination.

We must meet in order to discuss a concrete plan. Your presence is requested in Net Slum.

"He could've just said that at the start," I grumbled, snatching up my FMD and heading into The World.

"Yo!" I called, warping into Net Slum and seeing that Balmung, Wiseman, Helba, and Lios were already there. "Has anyone else shown up yet?"

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"Just those you see. We'll wait a little longer," Wiseman, said, then fell into silence.

"All right," I said. I'd tried to get in touch with Kite before coming, but he hadn't responded. I had just assumed he was already on his way. Still . . . *If you're going to call it an operation, isn't this too small a group? Then again, the fewer people in harm's way the better.*

As I was looking around at the scenery again, I saw a warp gate open next to the stained, vermilion Shinto shrine archway. A familiar red Twin Blade stepped through it.

"Kite!" I cried.

"Am I late?" he asked, smiling at me as I ran over to him. Then he looked around at the impatient faces of the others present.

"I suppose you were prompt enough," Balmung said, his arms folded.

Helba took the reins. "Let's begin," she said, looking to Wiseman.

"The outline of this operation is as you were told in the e-mail," Wiseman said. "If no one has any questions, then Helba will explain the distribution of duties."

"During this operation," Helba said, "Lios will investigate the 'abominable Wave' and observe CC Corp. employees. Wiseman will collate and analyze the data collected." She turned to Kite. "You will lead this operation's strike force and confront the abominable Wave at the appropriate time. The rest of us will divide up the other duties as the situation warrants. Wiseman?"

Taking his cue, Wiseman spoke up again. "Specific targets have not yet been determined. As soon as they are, we will begin our

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first intervention. I will keep everyone informed of our operating schedule via e-mail. For now, that is all. Dismissed!"

What? I thought. Having assumed the operation would begin right away, I found myself feeling quite disappointed. With nothing to do, I stood and watched the members warping out one after another.

Kite came up to me. "BlackRose?" he said. "Are you doing anything after this?"

"Huh? Oh, no, nothing in particular."

"There's an area I'd like you to go with me to."

I jumped at the chance. "All right, let's go!"

When we got back to town, before we set out for the field, Kite said, "There's someone else I want to invite—do you mind?"

It's not like I can say no, I thought. Then I wondered if he'd invited me along just to act as support for this other character, instead of because he specifically wanted me with him. "Okay . . ." I said hesitantly, then heard a female player's voice from behind me.

"How do you do?"

Turning around, I found my eyes riveted on the unfamiliar Heavy Axeman. She was dressed in pure white, with small white wings on her back (different from Balmung's) and a smile like an angel's. Heck, there was even a halo floating above her head.

"This is Ryoko Terajima," Kite said, introducing her. "She's a newbie, so she asked me to teach her som—"

"Yeah, I know about her," I interrupted. "She's the one who posted that message on the BBS about wanting someone to show her the ropes?"



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"Yes," Ryoko Terajima said with an even more charming smile. "Kite was kind enough to take care of that."

"Kite?" I said, surprised. *Oh yeah, what was it that rude player character said? That she'd teamed up with some red guy or something . . . I never guessed it was Kite.*

"Umm, this is BlackRose," Kite said, introducing me to her. "I invited her to come along with us, if you showed up."

I bowed my head.

"It's nice to meet you!" she said, smiling brightly, then brought her hand to her mouth. Her shoulder-length golden hair swayed gracefully as her head moved. She had a slight figure and gave off a sort of "you know you want to protect me" aura, and was even more girlish than Haru. "My lady" was a perfect phrase for Ryoko Terajima. But I had the undeniable sense that there was something out-of-place about her.

"Likewise," I said, unable to keep my mouth from twitching.

With Kite in the lead, the three of us warped to Σ : Generous, Bemused, Virgin. It was a field covered in dazzling snow. For a long time I'd been sure that all of The World's areas had been contaminated to some extent, but one look at the snow field stretching before me eased my mind a great deal. I couldn't see any signs of contamination at all.

But then I saw the sky, and it was filled with fissures as usual. *Maybe there really is nowhere left in the game that's been left untouched.*

As soon as we had warped in, Ryoko Terajima had run toward the dungeon entrance. "Let's go!" she shouted.

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Here I'd been thinking she was a shy, sheltered girl, I mused. I hurriedly took off in pursuit, Kite running at my side.

"Actually, she asked me to help her get items," he confided apologetically.

"Don't worry about it," I said, and smiled. That was just Kite's personality—if someone asked him to help, he couldn't refuse.

Entering the dungeon, we started the trek toward the Gott Statue that awaited us on the lowest level. But the monster that popped out of the first magical portal we passed made me shout in surprise. "What the—!" It was a Data Bug. I'd never seen one come out of an ordinary portal like that before.

We knew the routine, so Kite and I dispatched it in the usual manner, though we had to make allowances for guarding the low-level Ryoko Terajima.

"What's going on?" I asked Kite once the monster was no more.

"I don't know," Kite said, tilting his head. We were probably both wondering whether Lios knew that things had progressed to this point.

The further we went, the more portals we triggered, and each time the monster that appeared was clad in luminescent green hexes.

The contamination's definitely spreading, I thought. I tightly gripped my massive sword and braced myself for the downward trek. It wasn't long before we'd battled our way through more Data Bugs than I'd seen in my entire time in The World. And right after we reached the lowest level, we heard footsteps behind us that were heavy enough to make the whole room vibrate.

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Another Data Bug? I turned and brandished my sword. The approaching monster looked like a genie so large that I wasn't sure how it even fit under the roof. *First Data Bugs, and now this?!*

The floor shook as the monster charged. "It's an enemy!" Ryoko Terajima cried, lunging forward. "Here I go!"

"Terajima!" Kite shouted. "Don't just run at it recklessly!" But his advice went unheeded—she headed right for the monster.

Hey, what's with her?

"Raah! Take this!" she yelled, pouncing on it. If she did any damage at all, it was negligible. No matter how many times she swung her axe, its hit points gauge showed no signs of decreasing. "Eek!" she yelped, as the monster shook her off like a fly. It reared its arm back to take a swing at her, and with her level so low, it was obvious that any blow from this monster would just about kill her.

"We've got to save her!" I cried, but Kite moved faster than me and grabbed her in time to dodge the monster's strike.

"That enemy's too strong for you!" Kite scolded her. "There's no way you can beat it at your level!"

As Kite was distracted, I saw the monster quickly wind up for another swing. "Kite!" I yelled, and Kite looked up—but it was already too late.

With no time to even block, the monster's powerful blow knocked him aside. He gasped, and the monster kept coming. I sprang at it instinctively with my sword raised, but just as it became clear I wouldn't make it in time, a miracle unfolded before my eyes.

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Right after Ryoko Terajima turned her head up to look it in the face, the monster suddenly stopped moving at all.

"What the hell is going on?" I murmured, looking up at the frozen monster. It started slowly falling apart right in front of Ryoko Terajima. Unable to make heads or tails of what had just happened, I watched Kite approach her from where the monster had thrown him.

"You all right?" he asked her. He himself looked relatively unscathed.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice shaking. "I wasn't conscious of my own power, and acted rashly. I'm just . . . no good. I always—even in this game, I always cause people problems like this. I'm really, really sorry. I really am."

"Huh," Kite said to the downhearted girl. "If you know what you do is rash and causes people problems, then why don't you just change? I'm sure you can do it if you put your mind to it." He paused. "I like you—everyone likes you."

Hub?

"Th-thank you," she said, bowing her head. Kite scratched the back of his head like he was embarrassed.

What's . . . going on here? I wondered. Suddenly I felt entirely out of place. *Everyone likes her? Is he including me in that?* Miffed, I inserted myself between the two. "The monster's gone," I said. "Shouldn't we get moving?" Even if my word choice was benign, I could tell that my tone of voice had shown my irritation. It wasn't like BlackRose's usually firm persona—but Kite completely failed to pick up on it.

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"You're right. Let's move on," he said in his typically soft voice, and urged Ryoko Terajima onward. Seeing his attitude irritated me even more, even though he acted like he always did—it just put me in a bad mood for some reason.

"Okay!" Ryoko Terajima said, moving forward without even looking at me. I followed her and Kite wordlessly.

Our path soon led us to the room with the Gott Statue, where the dungeon's items would be found. I wondered what she wanted so badly that she'd ask for Kite's help to get it, so I watched from behind as they triggered it. The treasure box popped out like always, and two items were in it that shops would pay high prices for: a golden grunty and an ivory bracelet. *That's all she was after?* I was very surprised.

Ryoko Terajima picked up the items and beamed at Kite. "Thank you so much!"

"Don't worry about it," Kite said.

Our mission accomplished, I figured the dungeon's danger level warranted getting us out of there as soon as possible, so I used up a sprite ocarina, an item that allows you to escape from dungeons. Once we were back in town, Ryoko Terajima thanked Kite again and again, then finally left. We watched her walk off. Once she was out of sight and gone from the status bar, I leaned toward Kite. "What the hell're you *thinking?*" I hissed.

He was obviously taken aback. "Huh?"

"We finally all decided to work as a team, and even had a strategy meeting . . . This is no time to be fooling around!" I ranted

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at him. In my heart I realized Kite hadn't been playing around, and I knew his personality wouldn't let him ignore people who were in trouble. But I was just so irritated that although I knew full well blowing up at him was a mistake, I couldn't make myself stop.

"Sorry," he said, and when he hung his head and apologized so openly instead of fighting back, my anger felt all the more futile.

"Just so long as you understand," I groused. "Try paying a little more attention to things, okay?"

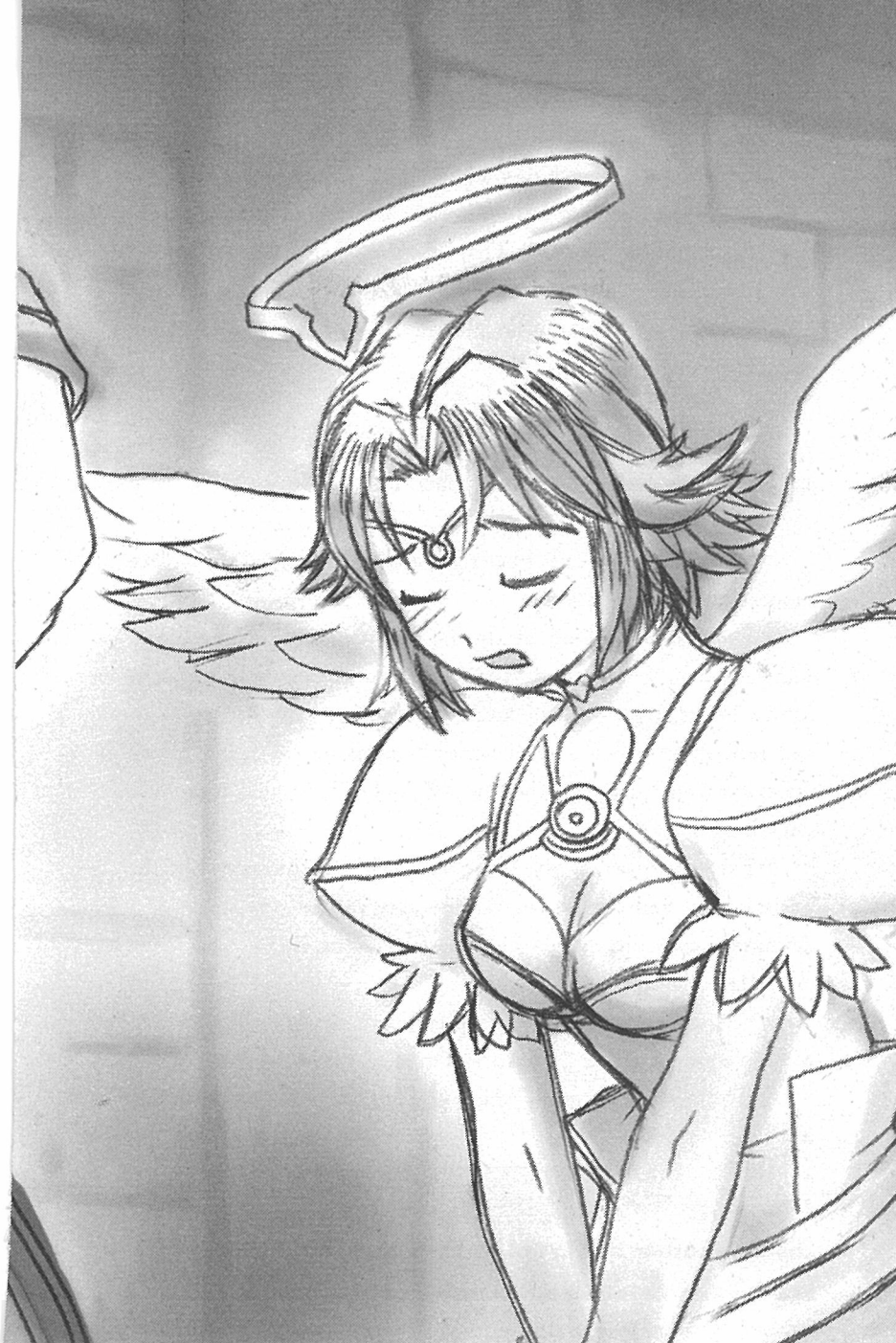
He nodded, and finding myself unable to say anything more to him without blowing up further, yet knowing I wouldn't have the visceral satisfaction a real argument would bring me, I gave him a simple goodbye and logged out. Maybe he did have his own motivation for inviting me along, but all I could feel was anger. And knowing that made me feel incredibly pathetic.



It wasn't anywhere near bedtime when I logged out of The World, and I found myself with nothing to do there in my room except mentally beat myself up over what I'd just done. That didn't last long before I gave into the rational suggestion that continuing to worry about it wouldn't do me any good, so I sat down and started writing an e-mail to Kite.

Uh, I might have said too much earlier.
I'm sorry.





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I typed up that much of the message, then thought it sounded stupid and erased it. Not knowing what to write, I slumped across my desk and muttered, "Ugh. That was *horrible*."

I checked my alarm clock. 8:00. *I should stay up until I can bring myself to apologize somehow*, I thought, but just then my cell phone signaled an incoming message.

I want to talk to you about the *Epitaph of Twilight*. Can you come meet me?

It was Asaoka. I called her right away. We decided on a place to meet, and I left the house.

The fast food joint at the nearby station was surprisingly empty, though I wasn't sure I'd been there at that time of night before. It was large, with the kitchen and counter on the first floor and seating on the second. I wasn't hungry yet, so just climbed the stairs. When I got to the top and looked around, I came to a screeching halt.

The place was empty, so Asaoka was easy to spot. But she wasn't alone, and the person sitting next to her was someone I definitely hadn't planned on seeing tonight—Hagiya.

Why is he here?

Very conscious of Hagiya's presence, I slowly walked over to where they were sitting. "I'm sorry I'm late," I told Asaoka.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "I'm the one who called you up all of a sudden."

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My eyes shifted to Hagiya. "Uh . . ." I'd thought it would just be the two of us talking, and Hagiya being there really threw me for a loop. So I just stood there not knowing how best to break the ice.

Hagiya took note of my silence and stood up. "Anybody else want some warm tea?" he said, then went downstairs without waiting for an answer.

"Uh—" I said again, trying to follow after him, but Asaoka lightly tugged at my arm.

"Have a seat," she said. "Hagiya's in my class, you know, and . . . I think in his own way, he's concerned about you. Anyway, I was thinking I needed to apologize to you."

"Apologize?" I said. "How come?"

"Well, I ended up showing it to someone else," Asaoka said. "It just happened coincidentally, but I'm really sorry about it."

Showed what? Not sure what she was getting at or why she would apologize to me for it, I tilted my head and stared.

"The *Epitaph* printout . . . he happened to see it," she said slowly. "I never meant for that to happen. But . . . him seeing it allowed me to make some progress."

"Progress?" I parroted, feeling terribly stupid.

"Hagiya is curious and studies up on a lot of different things," she said. "So when he saw the printout, he asked me why I was investigating the *Epitaph*. Even though I felt like I shouldn't tell anyone, he was so persistent that I gave in."

"What?"

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"Oh, I haven't told him about your brother," she assured me. "You told me that in confidence, so that's not something I would share with anyone else. But just the fact that you were investigating the *Epitaph* . . . that didn't seem like confidential knowledge, so I told him that, and suddenly he got really enthusiastic and said he would meet with us . . ."

I understood what Hagiya was doing here now, but it still brought up conflicting emotions for me.

"Is it bad that he came here with me?" Asaoka asked. "Don't the two of you get along?"

"Huh?"

"Hamaoka said you did," she said.

"Uh, it's nothing like that. I guess he's just someone I know—from school . . ." I started to explain, then noticed that Asaoka was looking over my shoulder.

"Here you go," Hagiya said from behind me, then came around and put a steaming cup in front of me.

"Ah!" I cried, hurriedly taking my purse out of my bag. *There's no way I'm going to let him treat me!*

Hagiya put his hand on my wrist, shaking his head. "This is for getting myself involved in this without your invitation," he said. "Please accept this as my apology."

I wasn't really satisfied, but I bowed my head. "Okay then, I accept."

Hagiya smiled, happy with my answer. "Still though," he said, "I never knew you played *The World* too, Hayami."

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"Too?!" I said, surprised.

"I used to play it myself," Hagiya said. "It's been a really long time since I last logged in, though."

At those words, I felt a great sense of relief. There was little I would be less enthusiastic about than having him follow me around in-game as well as in the real world.

"But maybe I shouldn't have quit," he said, aiming an impish smile my way, from which I averted my eyes. "I didn't know it was connected to the *Epitaph of Twilight*."

"Well, shall we get down to business?" Asaoka broke in, and I nodded earnestly. Seeing this, Hagiya laid out on the table all the materials I had lent to Asaoka.

Epitaph of Twilight 00
Shunning the field
broken by wave,
the shadowed girl whispers,
"Surely, I will return."
Alas, the truth unbeknownst,
awaiting her at journey's end!
eternal mourning for her land.

Epitaph of Twilight 01
When the finger points
to the wonder moon,
The fool will not look at
the fingertip.

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Epitaph of Twilight 02

The whole cannot be
changed. We have already
lost that chance.
Because the time left
to us was short,
We were mistaken in our
path. But now do we realize,
We should not alter the whole,
But change the parts.

Epitaph of Twilight 03

Wave soars and shrouds
the eyes.
No means to fight an
omnipresent force,
The shadowless ones just grieve.
Why must it be a Wave?
Divide, if it
would just . . .
Then retaliate, we may.

Epitaph of Twilight?

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Epitaph of Twilight

The Keel Mountains

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traversed at last,
We met a dragon who
spoke thus: "Sheraton am
I, who interprets the signs.
An answer to my question
give. If you can, complete
my role will be. And I
will leave this land.
Though equally it exists
before everyone's eyes,
Grasp it not one person can.
Tell me-what is it?"

Epitaph of Twilight
Unknown where the Cursed Wave
was born . . .
After the stars doth cross
the heavens,
The sky in the East doth darken
and air doth fill with mournings.
From the chosen land
beyond the forest, a sign of
the Wave comes.
Riding the Wave is Skeith,
the Shadow of Death, to
drown all that stands.
Mirage of Deceit, Innis,

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betray all with the flawed
image, and did aid the Wave.
And by the power of Masus,
a drop from the Wave doth
reach the heavens, and
creates a new Wave.
With the Wave, Fiddhell,
the power to tell the dark
future: hope darkens,
sadness and despair rule.
Gorre schemes when swallowed
by the Cursed Wave.
Macha seduces with
the sweet trap.
Wave reaches the
Pinnacle, and escape
none can. Tarvos still
remains with more cruelty
to punish and destroy.
And with the turbulent
destruction, after the Wave,
only a void remains.
From deep within the void
arrives Corbernik.
Perhaps then the Wave is just a
beginning as well.

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Epitaph of Twilight (Wiseman's e-mail)
And Helba, Queen of the Dark,
has raised finally her arms,
Apeiron, Kins of Light,
beckons . . .

At the base of the
rainbow they meet.
Against the abominable Wave,
together they fight.

Epitaph of Twilight (Mia's words)
Plaird of the Seven Sisters,
falling in love with a human,
Became a Shadowed One and
was exiled from the Dark.
Hence, her name came to be
called Plaird the Fallen.
At her wanderings' end,
she settled in seclusion
in Arche Hookar.
However, those days
may not last.
A reunion may come, or
may not. Plaird's form
vanishes at the coming of the
harbinger of the Wave.

•hack // Another Birth

Looking at them all spread out together like that, I had the feeling that if you looked at them closely you'd be able to pick up on something.

"First off, the *Epitaph of Twilight*," Hagiya said. "How much do you know about it?"

"It's an epic poem written by Emma Wielant," I said. "In short, it's about, uh . . ."

"It's about a world being ruined by a Wave," Asaoka said, picking up where I faltered, "and about adventurers searching for the legendary Twilight Dragon who is said to be able to save the world. Is that about it?" She summed it up nicely and concisely, I felt.

"That might not be enough," Hagiya said with a serious expression on his face, looking first at Asaoka and then me. "The world of the shadowless sprites is violated by the calamity called the 'abominable Wave,' and it's on the verge of destruction. The Wave only advances gradually, but there's no clear way to fight against it. Under these desperate circumstances, Apeiron, King of Light, and Helba, Queen of the Dark, decide to form an alliance to oppose the Wave together."

Listening to Hagiya's words, I called to mind those we had fought already. Skeith, Innis, Magus, Fidchell—each one of them had a definite physical existence that could be fought any number of ways.

"There was a legend in that world," Hagiya continued, "that when the Wave appeared, three people who did bear shadows would set off in search of the Twilight Dragon."

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"Searching for the dragon is the only way they know to oppose the Wave," I murmured.

Hagiya nodded deeply at my words. "Thus the three who have shadows—two half-sprites and one human—travel to the Wavering Peninsula at the edge of the world. Supporting them part of the way are Fili the White and Bith the Black."

I cocked my head. "I've never heard those names before," I said.

"Yeah," Hagiya said. "The World was built based on Fragment, which was made almost entirely by Harald Hoerwick, right?"

"That's what they say on the BBS," I agreed.

"And the worldview of Fragment was designed based on the *Epitaph of Twilight*."

I nodded. "So it would seem."

"At that time, Harald might have chosen which information to adopt or reject," Hagiya said. "I mean, well . . . I can't say anything about my reasons for thinking this right now, but there may not necessarily be a need for all of the *Epitaph* to have been absorbed into the game."

That may be true, I consented for the moment. *But in that case, why did Harald import the worldview of the Epitaph into the game in the first place?*

When I gave voice to that question, Hagiya laughed. "Because Harald was in love with Emma."

"In love?!" Not expecting that word at all, I found I had raised my voice wildly.

"Yup," Hagiya confirmed. "It was love at first sight."

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Say what?! I'd known that Emma Wielant was an author who was famous on the 'net, and that Harald was a programmer, so I assumed that he'd just unilaterally yearned after her—I was surprised to hear that they had actually met.

"Emma isn't a historical figure from as far back in the past as you might have thought, Hayami," Asaoka said. She must have noticed my expression, since she began telling me about Emma's personal history.

Emma Wielant lost her mother at an early age. When she was eighteen, her father also died. His will named her uncle as her guardian, but this uncle, with his eyes on her inheritance, proposed to take her as his adopted daughter. Having grown up around her family's historical winery, Emma was not just any high-class girl. Quick witted, she entered a nursing school in order to support herself until the age of twenty when she would receive her inheritance. However, on the morning of her twentieth birthday, the strain of her intense workload caught up with her and she started coughing up blood.

"Did she end up dying?" I asked, straight-faced, and Asaoka interrupted her serious monologue with a smile.

"No, no," she said. "It didn't get far enough to put her in serious danger, and her condition greatly improved after a while. However, at the recommendation of a doctor, Emma spent a while at a health resort in southern France. While there, she had a mysterious experience that would influence the course of the rest of her life."

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"A mysterious experience?" I asked, intrigued.

Asaoka answered my questions patiently, without making a single nasty face. "That's right. From that point onward, Emma devoted herself to Steiner's anthroposophy."

Eb? "Anthrowhozit?" I felt like I was in some upper-level class in school that was way over my head.

Hagiya tried to explain. "Rudolf Steiner was a philosopher from Austria. Anthroposophy is a philosophy that attempts to explain spiritual and mental phenomena using human knowledge . . . or something like that."

Asaoka took over. "For example, take those ghosts you don't like. Even they have some reason for existing, like something they regret that they want to tell someone—finding out those reasons is part of anthroposophy."

"Harald pursued the question of the true nature of people and computers," Hagiya said, bringing the discussion back around, "and he apparently thought anthroposophy held some clues to the answer. So it's through anthroposophy that Emma and Harald are connected, you see?"

How can I see if I can't even understand half the words you're saying? "Uh, did Emma and Harald fall in love because of this anthroposophy?"

"No."

"What?" Now I was even more confused.

"Harald was the only one who fell in love," Hagiya said. "Emma was twenty at the time, and she had an older lover."

"Oh." I sat back.

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"Maybe what Emma loved," Hagiya said, "wasn't Harald, but Harald's talents."

"Just his talents, huh?" I said. "So did Harald not know that, or did he pursue her even though he knew it was futile?"

Hagiya shook his head. "It actually might not have been." Seeing the question in my eyes, he continued, "If it was futile, do you think he would have gone to all that effort to include Emma's epic in his game?"

"Hmm." *Good point.*

"You know," Asaoka said, "I've been thinking about that. If all he did was base the game's worldview on Emma's epic poem, I don't think you would have gotten into the situation you're in."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"Well, it's a very unusual story," Asaoka said. "There's something peculiar about it."

Peculiar? I chewed on Asaoka's words, thinking it over.

Hagiya spoke up again. "I think maybe Harald based The World on the *Epitaph of Twilight*, and then included something *beyond* that." He tapped the Harald's Note printouts with his finger.

Harald's Note

And so, I shall name her Aura.
Without you, she would not exist.
The Shining Girl, Aura.
We will entrust her with our will.

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Our future is in her hands.

She is our . . .

Harald's Note 2

I must . . . speak with Morganna.

To go where she is,

The living flesh poses a hindrance.

But I must. I must go.

For our Aura.

Emma, please give me a little more courage.

"Here, the part where it talks about the girl—I think it makes more sense if you think of Harald as the father," Hagiya said. "He's entrusting his own child with his will and his future—it becomes clear, right?"

I doubted my ears, hearing crazy talk like that coming from Hagiya. "Aura is Harald's *child*?" *How can some computer-generated girl be the child of a flesh-and-blood man?* "Uh, okay, so then who's her mother? Even if she's just in a game, it would be weird if she only had a father."

"Harald loved Emma," Hagiya said. "Isn't it only natural to want to have a child with the one you love?"

"But . . . why just in a game—?" I started to say, but then a thought struck me. *Maybe Emma was no longer around.*

Hagiya confirmed my suspicion. "Emma was in an accident, and left this world. I don't know if this part is true or just a rumor, but they say it happened when she was on her way to meet up with

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Harald. It was hours before news of Emma's death reached Harald; he simply continued waiting for her under the boughs of a large ginkgo tree on the top of a hill."

"So that would be why a child of his and Emma's would have to be a virtual one," I said.

"Probably," Hagiya said. "But even considering that, we still don't know what Morganna is. Given the wording, I suspect it's something hostile . . . but that name doesn't show up in the *Epitaph of Twilight*. And if you consider the words that follow, they could mean that Harald's no longer . . ."

"You mean . . . he somehow went from the real world into the game?" That was the direction this crazy conversation was going, so I went right out and said it. "And that explains his disappearance?"

"Or if you think about it from the point of view of the game," Hagiya said, "it was an *appearance*, since something suddenly came there from outside that world."

"Something . . ." I said. "You mean player characters like us? I mean, we use computers to get inside The World."

"Hmm. That's true, but I think that when you're playing, your consciousness is actually within the game."

"But my body is outside, still moving," I said.

Asaoka, who had sat silently pondering the issue, slowly murmured, "Perhaps both are possible."

Hub?

"You know . . . after Hagiya mentioned the idea to me earlier, I gave it a great deal of thought," she said. "Normally it wouldn't

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be possible to really go inside a game. But after talking it over with Hagiya, I started thinking that just maybe . . .” She hesitated, and looked me in the eye.

I looked from her to Hagiya, and knew why she couldn’t go on. So I took a deep breath . . . and told Hagiya what he needed to know. “My little brother is one of the people who have fallen victim to this game. He fell into a coma while playing, and he’s still in the hospital.” Hagiya was obviously surprised to hear it, but suddenly anyone’s reaction to the news didn’t matter to me anymore. “Asaoka, would you continue?”

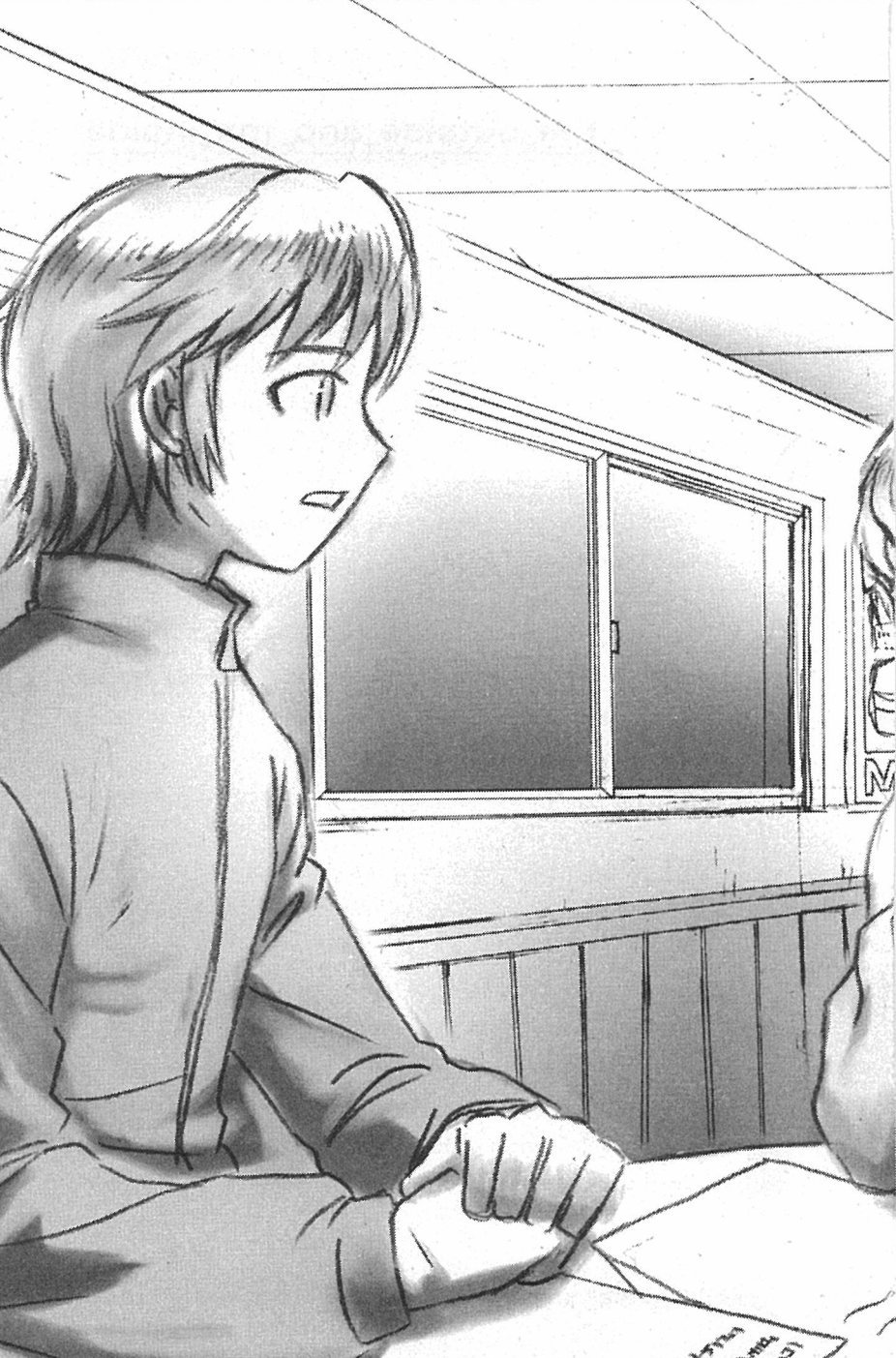
The words flowed more freely now, with nothing holding Asaoka back from saying whatever sprang to mind. “Fumikazu’s player character was in the game. But the real Fumikazu existed physically outside the game. He was in both worlds at the same time. And then, somehow, his mind and body got separated.”

I realized I had been holding my breath. “You’re thinking that’s the reason he fell into a coma?”

“There’s no other way to make sense of it, is there?” she said. “If it was just a normal game he was playing, it’d be impossible.”

Right. But . . . impossible things have been happening, so maybe Asaoka isn’t wrong, I thought. “The question is—how?”

“Yes, that’s it!” Asaoka said. “I mean, it’s not like everyone who comes into the game from the outside falls into a coma . . . That reminds me, Irka fell unconscious only after some kind of attack skill got used on him, right?”





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"You mean Orca," I said. "But that doesn't mean his mind is stuck in the game now because of some special power. And anyway I don't know if Fumikazu had that attack used on him or not."

"Listen," Hagiya said. "Sorry for coming back to this, but—Harald started out making a 'net game, right? I don't think he considers users as non-integral parts of the game. If something had happened to a user because of the game, then there's a chance it could become an environment unfit to raise a child in."

"You mean . . . a stoppage of game service," I said.

"Yeah. Or even worse, if all the game's data gets erased . . ." Hagiya said, then fell into thought.

Asaoka spoke up. "Maybe something happened that even Harald didn't account for."

"Didn't account for?" Hagiya said.

"The coma victims," Asaoka said. "It's natural to want to remove an unstable element, right? Maybe when Harald says in the note that he needs to speak with Morganna it's because something had happened. It might be a virtual reality . . . but I'm sure the child had a will. It wasn't just born fully formed—it was programmed to develop. You know, what's that called again? Artificial intelligence."

"AI?" Hagiya said.

Asaoka nodded. "That's it!"

That's what Kite heard Harald say! I thought. *The ultimate AI. Does that mean Aura?* And my mind made a sudden leap. *In that case, is Mia really Macha?*

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I couldn't completely follow what Asaoka and Hagiya were saying, so I just kept quiet.

"Maybe the girl, Aura, started acting unpredictably or strangely in the game," Asaoka said. "But like it or not, that doesn't establish any link with Morganna . . ."

"First of all, according to what you told Asaoka," Hagiya said, turning to me, "isn't Aura our only current source of information? We can't meet with the game's creator, Harald; Skeith and the other things aren't exactly conversation partners; and we don't know what Morganna is. But Aura wants something, so she gets in contact with your friends, right?"

"You mean she wants the segments, right?" I said.

That got a reaction out of Asaoka. "Oh! You mean the red spheres that flew away after she got attacked by Skeith? If she gets those, you should be able to meet with her?"

I nodded. And I became certain that what we had to do now was defeat the Wave that seemed to be holding Aura's segments hostage and get them all back to her. Some of what we'd said tonight had come from wild leaps of logic, but I felt in my gut that we weren't wrong.

After that we spent a while trying to analyze the events that had happened in the game, but we weren't able to puzzle out anything from the contents of the *Epitaph of Twilight*. The hour grew late and since we didn't want our parents to get worried because we'd been out so long, we decided to adjourn our conversation.

Hagiya and I saw Asaoka off from the bus station, then started on our bikes in the same direction toward our homes.

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"I'm sorry for butting in," Hagiya said as we rode.

I shook my head. "Hearing what you had to say today really helped out."

"If anything happens, call me anytime," Hagiya said. "I want to do what I can to help."

"But . . ." In truth, I was more than satisfied with the help he'd already provided. "No, it's all right. I don't want to trouble you too much about this."

"Okay," Hagiya said. "And I don't want to add to your worries either, so I'll content myself with supporting you in my own way, from a distance."

I wasn't sure how to respond to that.

"You might be doing this for your brother's sake," he said, pedaling on, "but I don't want you being reckless."

Hub?

"If anything happened to you . . ."

"I'll be all right," I said. "I've got allies I can count on—both there *and* here."

Hagiya's smile showed his relief. We'd reached the spot where our homeward paths parted, so we said our good nights and went our separate ways.

As I got closer to home, I couldn't help but feel like rushing. Even if the framework we'd developed to explain all the game's events was a vague one, I wanted to tell Kite about it right away, so I pedaled hard for the few blocks that remained.

Harald's Rule

So much had happened in this one night that I felt like it had lasted forever. No night I could remember since the day Fumikazu went away had felt this full.

I was itching to tell Kite what I had discussed with Asaoka and Hagiya, but when I entered The World soon after returning home, I couldn't help but remember how I had parted from him in a huff over that Ryoko Terajima thing mere hours before. Even though I knew Kite was logged in, I couldn't make myself go where he was. So instead of talking to him like I'd rushed home to do, I just stood alone in Fort Ouph in my guise as BlackRose, not doing anything at all.

This is no time to be stubborn, Akira! I grabbed the FMD and plopped it down on the desk, leaving BlackRose just standing there, still logged in, and I leaned back in my chair and stared at the ceiling. *This isn't like her*, I thought.

But though I tried psyching myself up by telling myself that there was no use feeling this way, my words had no effect. The courage

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to go see Kite had utterly deserted me. Then just when I'd started to entertain the thought of giving it up for the night and trying again the next day, I heard a voice calling to BlackRose from the FMD.

"Hey!"

Hurriedly looking back down at the display, I saw the familiar figure of Balmung. Quickly donning the FMD again, I started talking to him. "Wh-what?" It was a rare thing indeed for Balmung to seek me out. *Maybe there's an operation starting?*

"Aren't you with him?" Balmung asked.

"You mean Kite?" I said.

"Right."

"It's not like we're together all the time," I said. "What, you need him for something?"

"No, nothing in particular," Balmung said. "I just happened to see you standing here."

Oh, I thought, looking at the sky. And all this time I could have been off talking to Kite about the purpose of The World if I'd just gone to him instead of thinking too much . . .

"This isn't like you," I said.

"It's not?" Balmung tilted his head, puzzled.

I turned toward him. "It's not like you to come talk to me."

"I could say the exact same thing to you," he said.

"Huh?"

"This isn't like you."

My heart skipped a beat. It was like Balmung had seen straight through to the feelings I was repressing deep inside. *Yeah, the way I've*

been acting right now is definitely not like BlackRose. Brooding alone and acting depressed was not her thing.

But though that's true, I just can't speak to Kite right now.

My silence must have bothered Balmung, since he looked worriedly at my face. "Did something happen?" he said.

"Not really. It's nothing." I tried to talk tough, but my shaking voice kind of ruined the effect.

"All right then," he said. "See you around."

Hub? "Hey! Wait a minute!" The words just blurted out of me as Balmung turned to go. "You're gonna just say 'all right' and take off?"

"But you said nothing happened, right?" he countered.

I hadn't known Balmung very long, but maybe I wanted to tell him—*someone*. "Pick up on the mood!" I said.

"What mood?"

"Girls' moods, okay? Look, even if something's happened, girls often do things like saying nothing's happened!"

"Is that so?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, it's so," I said. "Ugh!" And Balmung's thick-headedness had annoyed me so much that I found myself telling him exactly why things had become awkward between me and Kite. Without even giving me any visual or vocal cues to show that he was following along, Balmung kept silent and just listened. He listened to how I couldn't help being angry . . . how I knew Kite had his own way of thinking . . . how I'd wasted so much time being angry for no reason . . . When I'd run out of things to say, Balmung suddenly spoke up.

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"Let me handle it!" he promised.

"Huh?" If this were some anime or manga, it would be at this moment that my eyes would turn into tiny dots. What did he mean by "let me handle it," and *how* did he propose to handle anything?

"It's not my forte," Balmung said, "but I can patch things up between people. Or at least I should be able to, right? Since we're in this together, it isn't good for us to quarrel."

"Well, that's true, but . . ." My words trailed off. Something about the way he said "quarrel" rang warning bells. *Does he think Kite is quarreling with me?* I had a feeling Kite wasn't the kind of boy who'd let something like this get to him. In point of fact, I was pretty sure I was the only one bugged by this thing at all.

As I hesitated to continue speaking, Balmung put his hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry!" he said.

"I'm not," I said, and though it was an automatic response, my heart was warm. Until this moment I hadn't understood why Balmung had a title like the one that had been given to Orca. He had a sour expression, a cold demeanor, and it had seemed he was interested in nothing but the game. But now, I was beginning to understand just a little that he was not only a powerful player character. *He's someone who takes time to consider the world around him. That's the real reason everyone respects him,* I thought, and I bowed my head. "Please . . . I have a feeling that my stubbornness is only making things worse."

"Right!" Balmung said. "Then wait here for me."

Hub?

But Balmung immediately warped through the Chaos Gate, leaving me bewildered and dumbfounded.

We could use Flash Mail to settle this rather than meeting face to face. How come he went to find Kite? I thought, also finding it odd that he'd told me to wait there. But since that meant I couldn't go anywhere, I sat down in an out-of-the-way spot and waited.

Sitting there in my chair in front of the computer, I adjusted the FMD and rested my chin on my hands. "How long am I supposed to wait?" I grumbled. After a couple minutes, I took off the FMD and went down to the kitchen and boiled some water to make hot cocoa. When I took the cup back up to my room, I saw on the display that Balmung had still not returned. Before me was just an ordinary scene of player characters coming and going. I only half-watched the screen as I sipped my cocoa, but I still managed to notice when a familiar player character appeared at the Chaos Gate.

"Kite!" Hurriedly putting the FMD on, I ran over to him. *Maybe Balmung did something!* I thought.

"BlackRose!" he said as I ran up. We exchanged greetings, but I still couldn't bring myself to look directly at his face.

"Hey, uh . . ." Kite said, trying to dispel the mood. "Uh . . . earlier—"

"No, it's okay!" I interrupted him quickly. "I guess I shouldn't have talked that way either. Yeah, don't sweat it."

Kite looked at me dubiously. "Huh? What do you mean?"

"Whaddaya *mean* what do I mean?"

Kite considered. "Oh, you mean Terajima?"

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I was confused. "Isn't that why Balmung told you to come here?"

"Balmung? No, I just thought you might still be here, so I came to check," Kite said. "You were mad before, so . . ."

What's going on? Where did Balmung go, then?

"What was that about Balmung?" Kite asked.

"Well . . . you haven't seen him?"

"No."

"Huh? I was sure he was going to meet you . . ." *Where did Balmung go?*

"Did something happen to him?" Kite asked worriedly. Just then, the familiar winged figure warped in behind him. I blinked.

Balmung spied us and walked over. Turning to Kite, he said curiously, "Why are you here?"

Arrgh! Enough already! I thought. *Please, just don't say anything stupid.* "Why? What the hell'd you go to do?" I cried.

"Like I said," Balmung explained evenly, "I went to try to patch things up."

"Patch things up?" Kite interjected curiously.

"Weren't the two of you quarreling?" Balmung said.

Kite was surprised. "Quarreling? Me and BlackRose?" He and the clueless Balmung both turned to me. "Did I do something?" Kite asked.

"Why are the two of you here together?" Balmung said at the same time.

Why is this happening? “W-well, that is . . .” I said. “I mean . . . Argh, fine! It was all a misunderstanding. My misunderstanding. Don’t worry about that ‘quarrel’ thing, okay?”

Kite and Balmung looked at each other dubiously. Unable to stand watching any longer, I looked away. *To think that I was the only one who thought there was a problem . . .* I wondered if there was a limit to how embarrassed a single person could get. I figured I had to be approaching that point.

“If you say so, BlackRose, we won’t worry about it,” Balmung said. He turned to leave, but I stopped him.

“Balmung! Hey, where were you going earlier?” I said.

“To talk to Kite.”

“You could’ve just Flash Mailed him to do that though.”

“Flash Mail’s no good for important stuff,” Balmung explained.

“Well anyway, as it looks like things are all settled now, I’ll be going.”

“Uh, um . . . okay,” I said lamely. “Thanks.” I bowed my head to him, and Balmung smiled and warped away.

Kite watched him go and murmured, “He could’ve Flash Mailed me and then we could’ve met up somewhere to talk.”

I half-smiled. “You said it, Kite.” *There’s something just a little bit off about our Balmung*, I thought. Maybe it was his integrity, or his lack of adaptability. But . . . maybe that was just part of his charm.

“Uh . . . sorry about before,” Kite said quietly. “About Terajima.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I should’ve known how you can’t ignore someone who needs help.”

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Kite scratched the back of his neck and gave a bit of an embarrassed smile. I couldn't help but smile back. And then I remembered what I really wanted to say. "Oh!"

"What?" he said.

"I wanted to tell you something," I said, "about this game—about The World. Do you still have time?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

"Let's form a party to talk, okay?" I didn't want any other players to be able to hear what I wanted to say about what I'd learned from Asaoka and Hagiya.

After accepting my invitation, Kite listened patiently to my story. I kept pausing and getting off track, and it would be a total lie to say I did a good job getting to the point.

"Something Harald couldn't account for . . ." Kite murmured to himself, falling into thought.

"What do you think that was, Kite?" I asked.

Kite shook his head. "I still don't know. But—there's just four more of them, right? If this is all based on the *Epitaph of Twilight*, I have a feeling we'll learn something after we get past the other four. And we're the only ones who can do that."

Honestly, I hadn't expected Kite to talk about *us* like that, and it made me happy to hear him put it that way. I was very glad that I worked together with him. I knew that by myself I wouldn't have been able to accomplish anything.

When I didn't respond, Kite looked at me worriedly. "BlackRose . . . ?"

"Eh? Uh . . . yeah," I said. "Right. We've already defeated four of them, so it's like we're just about over the hump." *Four more . . .*

But there wasn't anything left that we could do about it at the moment. As it was really late by that time, we decided to call it a night and logged out.



Fumikazu showed no change when I arrived in the hospital for my regular visit, but of course I hadn't expected him to. Still, as I sat at his side contemplating his softly breathing form, I couldn't help but think, *A little longer . . . It'll be just a little longer . . .*

While he slept there, I started talking as I always did about what had happened recently in The World. Then I also told him about how Asaoka and Hagiya were helping me in the real world. When I noticed that I was talking about Hagiya in almost the same way I talked about Kite, my face suddenly felt hot. It wasn't like I was dwelling on him or anything, but his face suddenly rose before my mind's eye.

I had played alongside Kite since the beginning, and he had proven to be someone I could trust with my innermost thoughts. He was an important companion I could count on.

But Hagiya . . . is different from a companion, I thought, then shook my head. *What the heck am I doing, dwelling on this in front of Fumikazu?* Ever since he had fallen comatose, it was true that all my attention had been directed toward searching for the cause, but it wasn't as if that





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was the reason I had rebuffed Hagiya's confession. "It's a question of priorities," I said out loud—not that I thought Fumikazu was listening, but giving voice to the thought helped clear my head somewhat.

And then I saw his eyes move behind his closed lids. I excitedly peered closely at his face for several minutes, but they didn't move again. *Did I just hallucinate that or something?*

Behind me, the hospital room door opened, and I heard a voice say, "Oh . . ."

When I turned around, there was the nurse who was in charge of Fumikazu's care. "Ah, thank you for all you do for my brother," I said.

The nurse nodded. "Of course."

What I'd just seen hadn't seemed like a hallucination, so I had to ask. "Um, has Fumikazu been asleep this whole time?"

He gave me a questioning glance.

"Uh, I thought I saw his eyes move."

"Ah," he said. "That happens from time to time. I told your parents that he might be dreaming."

I rose and bowed once to the nurse, who cocked his head curiously, then left the hospital behind me. It had already been over three months since Fumikazu had fallen into his coma. Thinking that he had been dreaming that whole time presented me with conflicting emotions of both sadness and happiness.

I want to wake him up soon, I thought. I quickly pedaled my bike the rest of the way home.



"Hi!" a voice called out to me the instant I logged in.

It was so sudden, I cried out spontaneously, "Yow!" Then I noticed that it was Mia who had called to me. She pulled up and contemplated me strangely.

Elk poked his head out from behind Mia and asked, "We're about to go get Aromatic Grass—want to come with?"

"Huh?" I said, still reeling a bit. "Mia, you're okay?"

"Say what?" Mia said, confused.

"Well, you took off suddenly the other day," I said.

"The other day?"

"Yeah. You muttered something and transferred out."

"What're you talking about?" she said, turning to look at the Chaos Gate.

Was she suddenly spacing out, or did she seriously not remember? I could never tell what Mia was thinking.

"Hey, Mia," I said slowly. "Remember, the words you said the other day?"

"What words?" She turned back and looked at me questioningly.

"About Plaird of the seven sisters."

"Huh?"

"Uh . . . isn't that what you said?"

"Me? I said something like that?"

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Yes, you did. And it wasn't that long ago either. In a bind, I looked to Elk for agreement—but he didn't seem to be paying attention.

I had heard from Kite that Mia had said her memory was fuzzy, so I decided not to push the issue. It didn't seem likely that I would get anywhere.

As on the previous occasion I wondered if I would be in their way, but Elk himself had invited me this time, and I was also worried about what might happen if Mia suddenly went strange again, so I accepted the invitation.

Adding me to the party, Elk asked as if in confirmation, "How about Σ : Scattered, Her, Footstep for today?" As I had no idea where to find Aromatic Grass, I deferred to their judgment.

The area we warped to was a snowfield thick with powder. There were fissures in the sky, but no scorch marks on the ground. Climbing the sloping hills through the snow, we steadily slogged through the field.

I figured that even if a Data Bug appeared, we would be okay—because Mia was there.

She wasn't a regular player character. She muttered stanzas of the *Epitaph*, and she'd shown me the scene of Orca being data drained—if she really was a player character, there was something truly unusual about her—some kind of special power. Having her as an ally gave me confidence that anything within reason could be dealt with. *But if she ever became my enemy . . .* I didn't want to think about that.

As I was lost in thought, I'd fallen a little behind, so I ran to catch up and said, "Y'know, Elk, I've never actually seen Aromatic

Grass." I knew it was an item, but I had no idea what purpose it served in The World. It didn't seem like anything *bad* to have, though, and it didn't even seem to be particularly rare.

"We just gather it up because Mia likes it," Elk said as we trudged along. "There's no other reason."

"Why does she like it?" I asked. "Because she's a cat-type PC?"

"I don't know why—" Elk said, and then Mia suddenly drew to a standstill.

A short time passed like she was thinking about something, and then she spoke up in a careful tone that was unusual for her. "It might have something to do with *that*," she said.

"With what?" I said.

"I've been having a lot of dreams recently."

Mia has dreams? I'd been thinking that she might be some kind of special non-player character, but NPCs couldn't dream, could they? So was there a real person playing Mia's character?

She continued. "In my dreams, I'm called Macha."

"Macha?!" I cried. *One of the names from the Epitaph of Twilight! Skeith Innis, Magus, Fidcbell . . .* Those were all the monsters from the *Epitaph* that we had defeated. Listed after them were Gorre, Macha, Tarvos, and Corbenik.

"My dream-self known as Macha is given Aromatic Grass from a boy who looks like Elk," Mia said. "When I'm with him I feel at ease. Maybe that has something to do with why I like Aromatic Grass."

"You feel at ease," I muttered, as if testing Mia's words, and stared at Elk's face. He was quiet, with a conflicted expression.

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"You . . . don't feel at ease with me?" he asked slowly.

Mia grinned at Elk. "That's not true," she said, then turned and loped off.

"A boy who looks like me," Elk muttered. "That's kind of sad."
Hub?

"I mean, it's not *me*."

"But he looks like you," I said.

Elk shook his head. "If she says he looks like me, that means it's someone else."

I understood what he was getting at. "Look—Mia said he looked like you," I said. "She didn't say you looked like him. Got it?"

"Oh!" he said, catching on. "So even in her dream, she's thinking of me." He seemed relieved. "Oh—Mia's getting way ahead of us!" He ran to catch up with her.

Which one is it really? I wondered. Does Elk look like the boy, or does the boy look like Elk? Which viewpoint did Mia see this from?

Mia had gotten so far ahead that she was out of view. As Elk ran after her, his figure diminished as well. Watching him chase after her, I grew more apprehensive. I couldn't tell him about it, but I started getting the feeling that this might be the last time we'd be able to see Mia.

"Hurry!" Elk called back to me, and my attention returned to BlackRose. Elk beckoned, and I ran toward him. "Found some!" he cried.

I didn't see any graphical representation of what he was talking about, but he'd apparently come across some of the item in question. "Where?" I said as I came up. Mia was there too.

"Inside this magical portal's treasure chest," Elk explained.

"You can find it that quickly?" I said.

"If you're lucky," Elk said, turning to Mia. "Here, Mia."

I couldn't see it of course, but they must have brought up their trade mode screens. After a few seconds, Mia smiled at him. "Thanks, Elk," she said. "I'll take good care of it."

Not wanting to intrude on their moment, I moved away quietly. The way Mia was acting now . . . she probably wouldn't want to leave Elk all alone, so if I wasn't there, she'd stay with him. I walked away until I could no longer see them. *I'll Flash Mail Elk later or something*, I thought, and left the area behind.



I returned to town alone just in time to catch the arrival of a new e-mail. It was from Wiseman. When I saw that the title was "To all involved in the operation 2," I logged out to open it, feeling some trepidation.

Here are the most recent reports from Lios and Helba.

<Lios' report>

There have been reports of a fresh rash of coma victims. Judging by the activities of my company's damage control team, the reports are apparently true.

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<Helba's report>

My monitoring of Σ server indicates that the capacity of Σ : Chattering, Snoring, Twins is increasing. At this time I see no other notable capacity changes, so this should be our first strike target.

To put that simply, she's as sure as she can be that Σ : Chattering, Snoring, Twins is where we'll find our next culprit. I recommend we execute this operation.

Operation name: Breakwater

Gather in Net Slum. That is all.

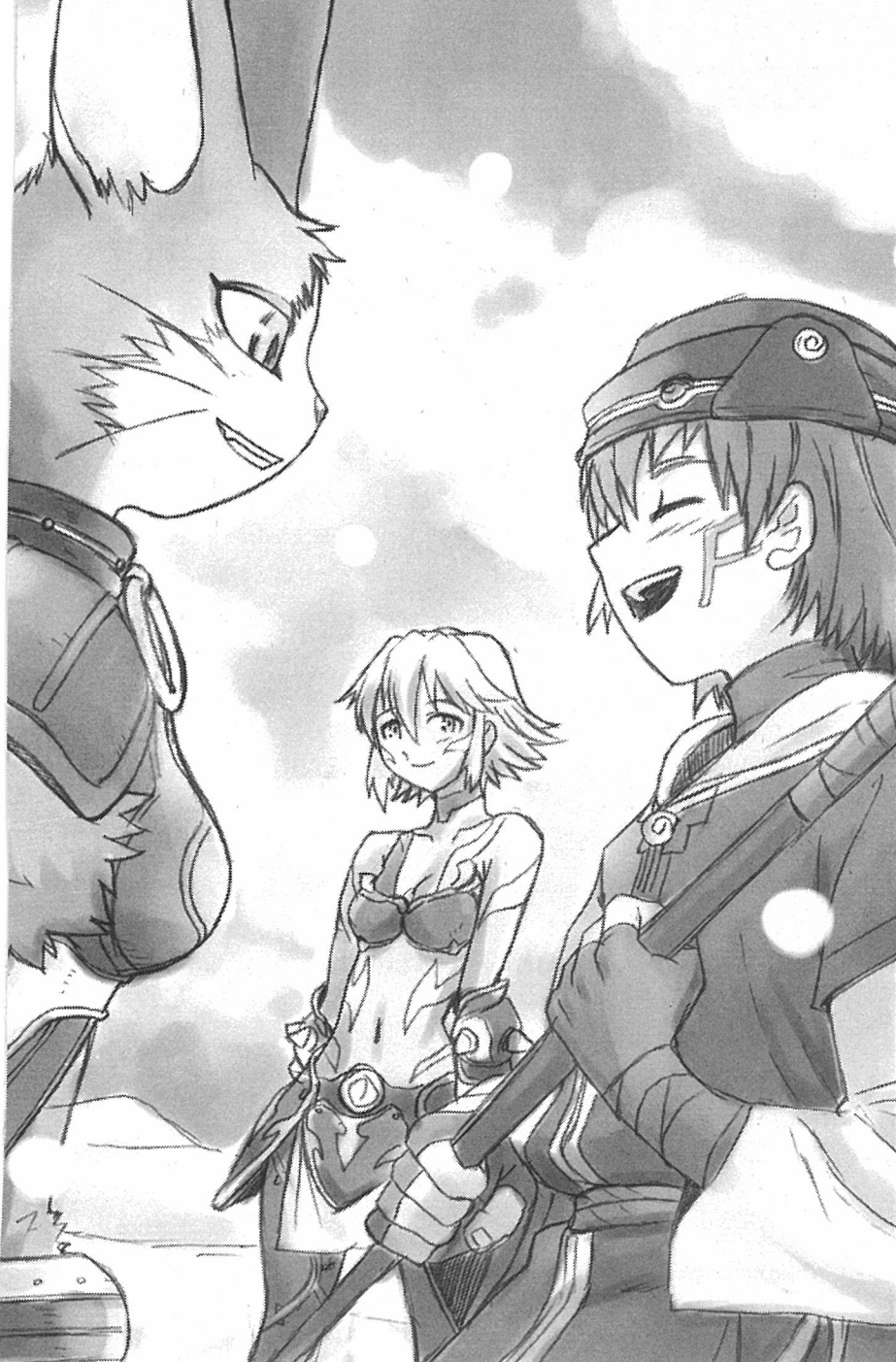
As I read back over Wiseman's e-mail, my spirits rose. "All right!" I said, and started typing a message for Kite.

You saw Wiseman's e-mail, right? I'll be waiting for you in Net Slum.

I watched it finish sending, then logged in and warped straight to Net Slum at A: Pulsating, Truth's, Core so I wouldn't get left behind or keep anyone waiting.

Wiseman saw me warp in, and called out to me. "Ah, BlackRose."

I looked around. "Kite's not here yet, then?"



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"You got here early this time," Wiseman said, raising his eyebrow at the way I was hopping about.

"This has got me all pumped up!" I said, and Balmung smiled wryly as he appeared from the shadow of the shrine arch.

"Now *that* sounds like you," he said.

"You're here too?" I said.

"Of course."

Lios and Helba flanked him. The only one we were still missing was Kite. "The, uh, enemy won't run away while we're waiting, will it?" I said apprehensively. When Helba looked at me questioningly, I continued, "You said something about the capacity of the area increasing, and I just wondered what would happen if it ran off."

"If it does run, we'll just follow it again," Helba said, calming my fears. "That won't be a problem."

"We have them by the tails," Balmung said. "Let us advance calmly."

"Yeah," I said. We were all in this together. And Kite had the bracelet, the key that would solve the riddle. *It's all right. I'm sure this will go just fine.*

At that moment, warp rings appeared before us. "Am I late?" Kite said as he appeared.

"No. We all just gathered," Helba said. Kite smiled, looking around at all of us.

"It's time," I said.

"Yeah." Kite nodded.

"It's up to you, Kite," Wiseman said.

"Huh?"

"If you say the word, we can get started."

Wiseman was right. If it weren't for Kite's bracelet, there was nothing we could do even if we found some clue to a solution. It was Kite who had gotten us all to work together, so he was the only one who could set things in motion.

"Come on!" Helba said.

Lios chimed in. "Go ahead!"

Kite started speaking awkwardly. "Uh . . . Well . . . This operation—is to return The World to normal and find some clue toward helping the players who are in comas. The name Wiseman picked for it was fitting—by ourselves we can't do anything, but blocks that stop waves, if we combine our powers, we can drain the power out of even a mighty wave . . . Err, I think that's how it works. Anyway, everyone—please lend me your strength!"

"I also want to see Orca again," Balmung said. "We've gathered here with the same goal in mind."

"As the bearer of the bracelet, you must launch the operation!" Wiseman said.

Kite looked at me with a troubled expression.

"Be firm about it! Decisive!" I said.

Kite drew in a deep breath. "May the Twilight Dragon's divine protection be with us!" he cried. "Commence Operation Breakwater!"

"Roger!" we all cried out in a surprising unison.

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We were all there to join forces and do battle against our common foe. We'd never done that before. *This is the beginning*, I thought, heat spreading in my chest.

Those of us who made up the strike force returned to town first. When we arrived in Carmina Gadelica, a party invitation came from Kite. "Let's get this over with!" he said.

"Yeah," I agreed. Usually, this was the point at which we'd add Mistral to the party—but she wasn't there anymore. Her absence weighed heavily on me.

"Are you nervous that I'm not a Wavemaster?" Balmung asked, as if he saw through my feelings. "All I want is to see Orca again soon. Please let me accompany you until the end."

Kite and I looked at each other, then smiled at Balmung, who accepted his party invitation. *Come to think of it, a party like this isn't so bad—it's really pretty amazing. The bracelet bearer and a Descendant of Fianna together . . .*

"All right, let's get going!" I cried, grasping the hilt of my massive sword, slung as it was across my back, and stood before the Chaos Gate.

"First we have to go to Fort Ouph," Kite said, and we transferred to Σ server.

"Is everyone ready?" Balmung asked in front of the Fort Ouph Chaos Gate.

"I am," I said. "Kite?"

"Me, too."

"Okay then," Balmung said. "Shall we go?"

I had been scared up until this point, and I was sure my fear wouldn't abate anytime soon—but I knew we could do it. “Yeah, let's go!”

The area we warped to—Σ: Chatting, Snaring, Twins—was considerably contaminated. Courtesy of the virus, the dark prairie was crisscrossed with scorch marks. Enormous fissures rent the dark sky, and a stark-white full moon threw everything into a harsh light. Character strings crept about like insects in the very air before me. As we made for the dungeon, ominous noises rang throughout the field.

The dungeon was like an old castle, and perhaps because of the broken graphics, it was filled with an eerie light. There were few magical portals, but in spite of that, the monsters triggered from them were exceptionally strong compared to others we had fought in the past.

While trying to conserve our recovery items as much as possible, we advanced deeper into the dungeon. On floor B4, which seemed to be the lowest level, we found a door enshrouded in purple mist. “This is it,” I murmured as Kite stopped in front of it.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Yes,” Balmung said.

“Get ready, increased data capacity, or whatever you are,” I said, and we moved in.

Once through the doorway, we found ourselves in a completely different area from the old castle we'd just fought our way through. “The area Σ: Chatting, Snaring, Twins is now quarantined,” Helba's

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voice echoed from nowhere in particular. There was a lot of static, like the isolation made transmission suffer. "Communications will be offline."

"Ready!" we all cried, and in that instant the display was engulfed in white waves that shifted to purple as they raged back and forth across our field of view. The colors inverted occasionally, making us strain our eyes desperately so that we wouldn't get disoriented.

The place we found ourselves in had a black surface lined with deep red hexagons, and ruins floated in an orange sky. It was always this same area where we battled our opponents from the *Epitaph*.

"It's here!" Kite shouted, and a monster reminiscent of a pair of ovoid drops appeared. Like its predecessors, it was a thin monster whose textured surface reminded me of lithographic prints.

"Just who designs these freaky things anyway?" I cried, voicing my first impression as if to brush away my fear. "Two of them—then let's cut them apart!" I ran and sliced into the monsters, and the name indicator that popped up read "Gorre," just as expected from the *Epitaph of Twilight*.

As might be suggested by the area keywords, the two appeared to be twins. But they weren't identical—one had physical tolerance, and the other had magical tolerance. They looked the same except for the colors of the gems embedded at the tops of their drop-like bodies—one was blue, and the other yellow; by paying attention to the gems, we could keep track of what sort of attack to use on which.

A screeching sound rang out, and BlackRose's body was wrapped in flames. My hit points had fallen to less than half. Checking the log, I saw the words "Creeping Murder" had appeared.

Since we had no Wavemaster, we had to recover our own hit points and skill points as best we could. I spent a full HP recovery item, Healing Elixir, and tightly regripped my massive sword.

All three of us attacked the one Gorre with magical tolerance, leaving the physical tolerance one to deal with later. The damage we did to it wasn't like what we could do to a regular monster, but though it dropped very slowly, its hit points gauge *was* depleting.

"What?!" I cried out in shock, after accidentally hovering my cursor over the physical tolerance Gorre—despite the fact that none of us had yet attacked it, its HP gauge had decreased to the same extent as the magical tolerance one's had.

When I reported this fact to Kite and Balmung, the latter said straightforwardly, "Isn't that because they're twins?"

Like that explains it at all! But as a party with no Wavemaster, we were grateful for the stroke of luck, since we weren't confident in our ability to use charms and skill point magical attacks.

"Let's just attack this one!" Kite shouted, using an attack skill on the magical tolerance Gorre.

"Got it!" I cried. Up until that point I'd conserved my skill points for our later assault on the second Gorre, but if we only had to beat one of them, there was no reason to hold back on using my most SP-costly attack skills. "Rai Smash!" I cried, and sent BlackRose somersaulting as her sword arced downward at

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Gorre. A move like that would make me dizzy in real life, but this was a game.

A dangerous game on which I had wagered the fate of my real life.

After my attack hit, I watched, shocked, as upon the outer skins of the two Gorres, what I had thought were lithographic designs rippled aside, and faces appeared as if rising to the surface of a lake. Their mouths split open, revealing teeth gapped like a crocodile's. Yellow eyes with deep red pupils transfixed me, and I found myself unable to move. *They have faces after all*, came the frantic thought, as a familiar object appeared between the two grotesque faces—with a shape like Kite's bracelet.

"Here it comes!" I cried.

Once again the bracelet was aimed at me. Even though I knew that as long as Kite was here, there was no way I'd fall into a coma even if I got data drained, fear still chilled my blood.

Once again I flailed BlackRose around helplessly as her body was lifted into the air. But having been through this before, I was more prepared—I opened my item list from the game menu and got ready to deal with any status abnormalities that would pop up after I got data drained. And then a deathly pale arrow shot through BlackRose's body—unable to look at it, I closed my eyes.

I wonder if this is how it was for Fumikazu?

I didn't fall into a coma, but sure enough when the data drain was over, I found that several status abnormalities had left their mark. I dealt with them in short order, then returned to the front line.

"You okay?" Balmung asked.

"No sweat," I said, and fired off attack skill after attack skill once more.

Finally, radiant green rings engulfed both the Gorres, and Kite confirmed the appearance of the Protect Break OK indicator.

"There it is!" he shouted, and lined up his sight at very close range; an arrow of light shot from the bracelet, forked, and pierced both Gorres right through their centers.

But nothing seemed to happen. Kite ran up beside me, rubbing his right arm where the bracelet was, and I asked, "Did you hit it?"

"Probably," said, and we stared at the Gorres, apprehension building.

But our fear was groundless. The data drained Gorre pulsed and degenerated into monsters formed by five stones each, connected by ropes. Balmung cried out, "What's this?"

"When Kite uses the bracelet, they always turn into something like this," I explained.

The two Gorres each had 6,000 hit points displayed, but they had neither magical nor physical tolerance. They also had low attack power, so it was with little worry that we hacked steadily away at them.

When their hit points were significantly reduced, Balmung yelled out, "GiRue Slash!" He unleashed a sword skill that sliced diagonally one way and then the other, and Gorre turned pitch-black and started to fall apart. As it crumbled, it let out some painful mutters, but I couldn't catch what it said.

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As we looked on, relieved, we heard Helba's voice once again echo throughout the air. "You did it."

When we looked up, we saw Helba hovering in the air, Lios beside her with his arms folded. "All appears to have gone well," he said. "An investigation will still be necessary, but I guess you have succeeded, for now."

Kite seemed to be contemplating something, but Balmung laid a hand on his shoulder. "Let us rejoice in our triumph," he said.

"Kazu," I whispered. "Hang on. We're nearly there." *Three more, and then Fumikazu will wake up.* Sure in my belief that that was the case, I slowly closed my eyes and drew in a long, deep breath. *Just a little longer.*

And then Helba spoke up once again directly over our heads. "Θ server—detecting massive data fluctuation! It's immense . . . possibly the Cursed Wave itself! It's moving—"

"It's running," Wiseman's voice broke in. "This marks the beginning of the counterattack."

As I was about to turn around to look for Wiseman, Kite slowly opened his mouth. "Counterattack? I . . . I don't think so. No, we've just realized the true rule of this game that Harald created," he said, looking at me. To make a statement like that, he must have been filled with a considerable conviction that it was true.

Harald's true rule. It was clearly different from the normal rules of The World. And it must have had something to do with Aura—perhaps a parent's assistance in the growth of his child.

Involved as I was, whatever the result, I would not run away. For Fumikazu's sake, regardless of whatever Harald's rule was,



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I would stick with The World, whatever turbid current tried to swallow me. However . . .

Waiting for us after Gorre is Macha. The name Mia was called in her dream.

When we confronted Macha—when Kite learned the truth about her—would he still use the power of the bracelet? Being Kite, I had a feeling he would hesitate. If that happened . . .

Standing there among the others who were rejoicing in the success of Operation Breakwater, I alone brooded over a dark premonition.

Thank You, Friends

I sat down in my usual place in Highland City Dun Loireag. The location with the great view that Mistral told me about had ended up becoming my favorite spot to sit and relax. I had logged in without anything specific in mind, and I just sat there taking in the scenery.

When my gaze drifted back over the city, I saw Nova walking along by himself.

Our eyes met, and he started toward me. Still sitting, I gave him a wave. "Yo!"

"You're all by yourself in a place like this?" Nova said, sitting down beside me.

"What about you?" I countered. "Aren't you with Chimney?" I thought he and Nova made good partners—a small, Western-style blademaker with a firm, Japanese-style blademaker. They were mismatched in appearance and personality, but I liked seeing a pair like that mesh well.

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But Nova had other ideas today. "Why would I be with a guy like him?" he said. Nova usually had a kind demeanor, so this was quite an unusual response.

I tilted my head. "Did something happen?"

"No, not especially . . ." Nova sighed.

This was the first time I'd seen him hesitant to say anything, and as I didn't think I could pry any further, I fell silent. Usually, no matter what mischief Chimney would get into, Nova generally laughed and forgave him. And no matter how passionately Nova talked, it didn't perturb Chimney at all.

Before I could ask what had happened, Nova spoke up and I had lost my chance. "So, what're you doing here alone? Waiting for someone?"

"Nah, I was just zoning out," I said.

He frowned. "That's not like you."

"No?"

"I've got this image of you as always on the go."

I considered that. "Do I come off as that restless?"

"Well, I don't see you in any town much, and you leveled way above me before I even knew it," he said. His voice was hollow, as if he expected an echo from an assenting voice, and it made me wonder even more what had happened. When I didn't respond, Nova peered at me inquisitively. "Did I say something weird?"

"Uh-uh," I said. "I was just thinking that this BlackRose-is-always-on-the-go thing is a misunderstanding."

He leaned back. "Oh? Is that so."

thank_you_friends

"Yup." I smiled under Nova's fixed gaze. I had no desire at this time to tell him why I was playing the game. Nor did I think I'd ever tell him in the future. But I was sure he'd noticed by now that I was caught up in something. Not wanting to prompt any probing questions from him, I kept silent.

Help me. ○_○

A Flash Mail appeared in my log, from Chimney.

I thought about telling Nova about it, but his earlier tone of voice at the mention of Chimney's name gave me the feeling that wouldn't be wise. "I just got Flash Mail from a friend," I said.

"Cool, cool. No worries," Nova responded nonchalantly, sporting a smile. He looked out toward the scenery, and I started a back-and-forth Flash Mail conversation with Chimney.

>What's wrong?

>>I'm teaching a newbie, but I'm not doing a very good job getting through to him . . .

>Why not get Nova to help you? He's here right now.

>>He's there?! Oh man . . . I wanted *you* to help me though, BlackRose.

>Me?

>>You can't? Got other stuff to do?

>Well, no, but . . .

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>>I'm near the bridge in Mac•Anu. It'd be great if you came by. (T_T)

I thought for a bit, then asked Chimney,

>Should I bring Nova?

>>Nova? . . . Nah. Come alone.

Well, if there was any doubt before, now it's obvious that something happened between them, I thought. What in the world could it have been? Well, Chimney needed urgent help, and if I went there now I'd probably be able to find some excuse to figure out what had happened.

>Hold on. I'll be right there.

I Flashed back, and stood up. "Someone needs me. Gotta go," I told Nova.

"Okay," Nova said. "Take care."

"Yeah, later," I said, and started walking away. I glanced back and saw that Nova just kept sitting there looking at the scenery, just as I had earlier. Averting my eyes again, I ran for the Chaos Gate.

As I approached our appointed meeting place at the bridge in Mac•Anu, Chimney waved to me from its center.

"Sorry," I said, jogging up. "Been waiting long?"

"Not at all!" Chimney said. "We've been talking about lots of stuff." Smiling at me, Chimney looked over his shoulder.

"Chimney. How did you do that wave?" a tall, slender, white-haired Twin Blade asked from behind Chimney. He wore what looked like a pitch-black ninja outfit, and he must have been the newbie Chimney had mentioned.

"Um . . . didn't I just tell you a minute ago?" Chimney said. "Try it."

The Twin Blade raised his arm and muttered to himself. He waved.

Watching him talk himself through it, Chimney shrugged and looked back at me. "This is how it's been the whole time," he said. "He's so . . ."

"Nice to meet you," the Twin Blade said. "I am Tarou. How do you do?"

"Nice to meet you too," I said, raising an eyebrow. "My name is BlackRose."

"Black . . . rose, like the flower," he said.

"Um, well . . . pretty much." I nodded vaguely, not having expected to be asked the meaning of my name. *There's something kind of off about this guy*, I thought, but neither my face nor my words betrayed my emotions.

Chimney explained anyway. "You see, Tarou's American."

Hub?

"I have come to the JP server to practice my Japanese," Tarou said.

"Really?" I was surprised. Despite the fact that The World was played in every country on the globe, I had never met anyone from

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outside Japan. *Though*, I thought, *since I don't exactly ask people about their personal lives, I could have met all kinds of foreigners before without realizing it.* "Chimney, she is cute, is she not?" Tarou said.

"BlackRose? Hmm . . ." Chimney considered me as if for the first time. "Well, she's just CG in the end." He smiled. "Besides, doesn't she give off more of a *cool* air than a *cute* one?"

"Flattery will get you nowhere," I said. This player character telling me I was cute was the first time that had happened, and though I knew it wasn't my real self he was complimenting, I still had a slight attack of shyness.

Tarou looked at me and Chimney, and said, "It is the color of your hair. It is pink, and very cute."

"Oh, her hair, huh?" Chimney and I raised eyebrows at each other again, and then Tarou smiled at me broadly.

". . . Messed that up," he whispered to himself in a vexed tone, and tilted his head. "Smiling is very difficult."

"What?"

"Ah . . . more motion command practice," Chimney said. "Tarou, did you mean to do that smile when you said the word *cute*?"

"That's right," Tarou said. "It is difficult."

"You'll be fine once you get used to it," I assured him. "I messed up the timing when I started out too."

"Oh, you did?"

"Yeah. It just takes some practice. You'll be fine," I said, and patted Tarou on the shoulder.

Tarou smiled and passed me his member address. "You're supposed to give this to people you first meet, right?" He looked at Chimney for confirmation.

"Okay then, me too," I said, and passed my address back to him.

"May I invite you?" Tarou asked.

"Of course!"

The words

Tarou>> wishes to form a party!

appeared in the log, and I accepted at once.

"Hello all over again," I said.

"Yes, here's hoping for the best," Tarou said, and after pausing for a second, bowed. His inexperience was a pleasant reminder of what I'd been like when I'd just started the game.

"So, why don't we get started and go somewhere?" Chimney said.

"Go where?" Tarou asked.

Since we'd formed a party, there was only one logical answer—an area where we could start an adventure. Me the Heavy Blade, Tarou the Twin Blade, and Chimney the Blademaster—would a party so heavily tilted toward the attack end of the character spectrum do all right? I felt a twinge of anxiety, but it was fleeting. If Tarou had just started out, then a newbie area had to be our destination.

"△: Bursting, Passed Over, Aqua Field?" Tarou asked when we reached the Chaos Gate.

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"Yup," Chimney said. "This is your first time, so let's go there today."

A player character who had just started only had those three keywords available by default. In the future he'd have to learn other keywords from the BBS or from other players. After we explained that to him, Tarou nodded. "Then, let us go."

The three of us warped from the Chaos Gate.



△: Bursting, Passed Over, Aqua Field was a place everyone was sure to come, an open meadow stretching out indefinitely, with a yellow sun hanging in a blue sky. Yellow spheres dotted the plain from nearby to far in the distance.

Tarou looked around the field. "There are . . . no monsters?" he asked curiously.

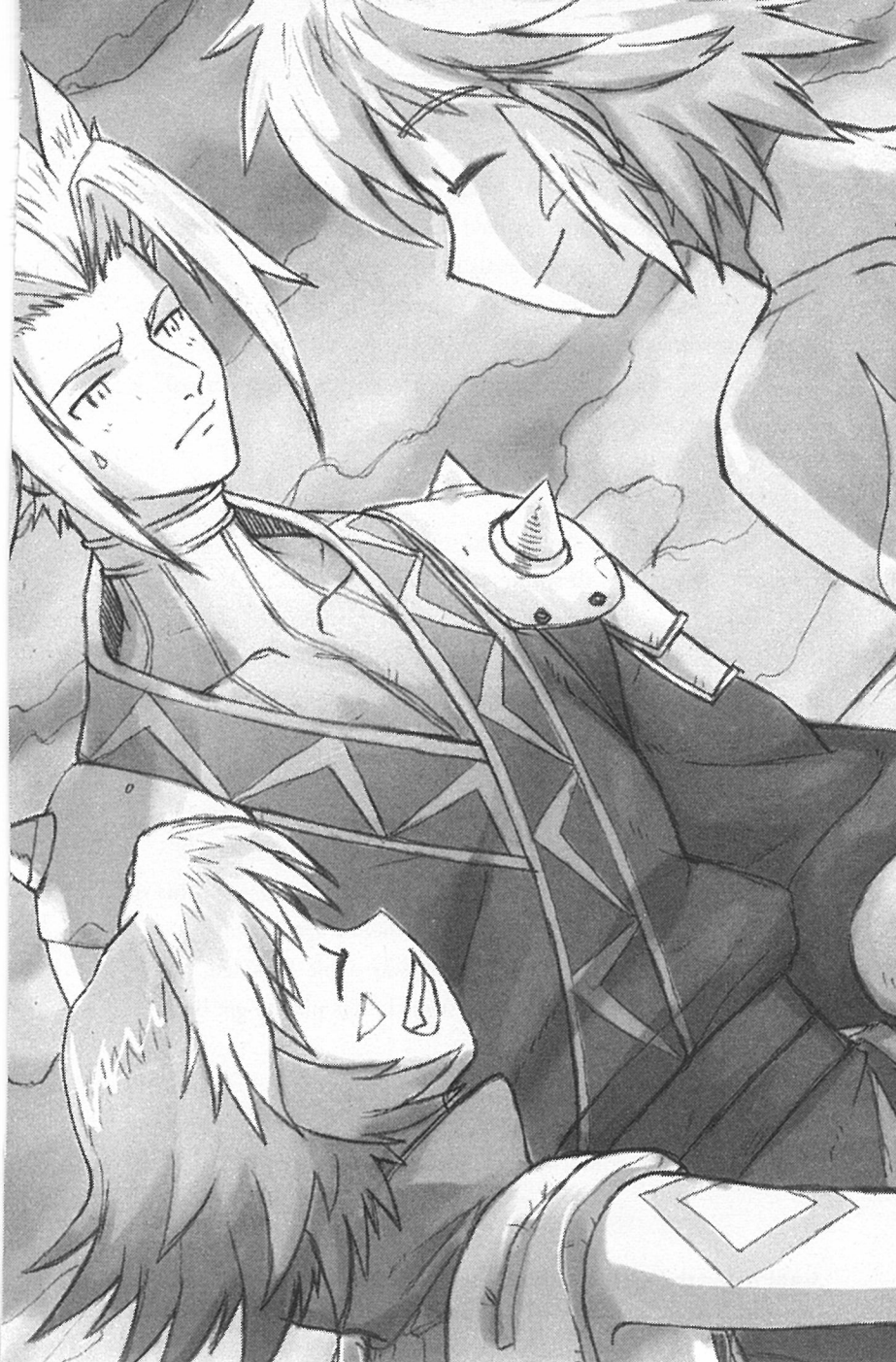
"Well, you see, monsters come from magical portals," Chimney explained patiently.

"Magical portals?"

"These, these," said Chimney, and he approached a nearby yellow sphere that pulsed with pale patterns.

"Oh!" Tarou exclaimed, as an emaciated goblin-type monster with long, narrow ears emerged from the portal.

It was a monster Chimney or I could defeat in a single blow, but since that wouldn't be any help to Tarou, we took the opportunity to teach him about combat. Demonstrating attack skills that worked



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in combination with weapons, magic skills that required specific equipment, and items that invoked spells or recovered points, we took care of all the magical portals in the meadow.

"No treasure chests. Huh," Chimney muttered with some disappointment as we stood in front of the dungeon entrance.

"Are you still trying to spring every trap you run across?" I asked him, surprised.

"Yup!"

"Traps?" Tarou asked.

"Yeah, traps that are rigged on treasure chests," Chimney explained. "My goal is to spring every single one!"

"Why?"

"I dunno, it's just fun," Chimney said, shrugging. "The instant you open a rigged treasure chest, you get damaged almost to the point of death, or poisoned." He smiled broadly.

"Your way of playing sounds interesting," Tarou mused.

Chimney chirped, "Fighting only when it's safe is boring."

Tarou considered. "So this field has been boring for you?"

Chimney rolled his eyes. "Aw, that's not what I meant. This is fun in it's own way, right?" He looked to me for agreement.

I smiled wryly. The conversation was a bit lopsided, and I found myself stifling a laugh as I answered, "It's nice to get back to basics sometimes."

"That is good, then," Tarou said, nodding.

The three of us wandered through the dim stone dungeon in the style of an old castle, relying on the torches that were

shining here and there on the walls. Tarou enjoyed tripping the magical portals, and he was doing a good job getting used to the combat system. This being the easiest dungeon in the game, we got to the Gott Statue with no problems.

Before the faintly glowing statue, Tarou stopped and looked down. "This is it?" he asked, pointing at the treasure chest in front of the statue. He showed no sign of attempting to open it.

"What's up?" Chimney asked him, smiling. "You can open it, you know."

"Well, I'm afraid for some reason," Tarou said.

"Afraid?"

"I'm afraid that if I open it, this Gott Statue will fall on top of me."

Chimney laughed. "I thought that the first time too! But that never happens."

"All right," Tarou said. "I will open it."

What came out of the treasure chest was a sprite ocarina. With the chest now open, the Gott Statue made a sound and sank down into the ground. Tarou watched it go, then turned around and asked, "Is this the end?"

"That's right," I said. "That's the end of this area."

"It was too short," Tarou murmured emptily.

"Maybe this area was," Chimney said, smiling. "But because you passed it, now you can go around to lots of other areas. Though, if you go to one with strong enemies, it'll take longer." He sighed.

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"You have to get keywords to go to new areas, correct?" Tarou asked.

"You can get them from lots of places, though," Chimney chirped. "They're not hard to come up with." He paused, probably considering what keywords to teach Tarou. "What would be a good place . . . BlackRose, are there any areas you recommend?"

"Hmm . . . I've been going after specific goals, so I'm not sure I know anything appropriate," I said. There was only one set of keywords I couldn't forget, though—Δ: Hidden, Forbidden, Holy Ground—the place where Fumikazu went away. When I thought of those words, it brought up all the bad memories. I thought that was one set of keywords I wouldn't be telling anyone anytime soon.

"If you can get them on the BBS," Tarou said, "then I will go and research some keywords there. So would you mind waiting for me?"

Hub?

"If you have other things to do, then that is fine," he said. "But what do you think?" His gaze alternated between me and Chimney.

"I'm cool with it," Chimney said, smiling. "I have to go grab a bite to eat now anyway, but I'll be back after that. What about you, BlackRose?"

I didn't have any homework, and it wasn't like I was tired from tennis practice. But . . . "What about Nova?"

When I said that name, Chimney spoke up immediately, talking rapidly like he didn't want to talk about that. "Ah, don't bother him. Nova won't do things like this."

Really? When Nova was the first one to say anything to me the first time I logged into The World? I tilted my head, but decided it wouldn't be appropriate to talk about it in front of Tarou, so I said to Chimney, "Oh? Then maybe I'll join you after all."

"Thanks!" Tarou said. "Then, we should take a short break."

"Okay," Chimney said. "Let's get back to town first." He used a sprite ocarina, like the one Tarou had gotten from the treasure chest, to return us out of the dungeon. Once we got back to town and said our mutual goodbyes, we saw Tarou off.

"See ya later!" Chimney called and waved as Tarou warped out.

I took the opportunity to speak up. There was something I wanted to ask Chimney no matter what. "Listen . . ."

"Hmm? Oh, thanks a lot," Chimney said. "I'm not that great at teaching."

"No, it's no big deal."

"No really, you saved me."

I shook my head. "If that's what you mean by teaching then it's not a problem, but . . . isn't Nova the one who's good at this?"

Chimney faltered for a second. "Never mind about Nova," he said.

" 'Never mind'—did you have a fight or something?"

"Not really. Why?"

I peered at his face. "Because you're always together, and seeing you apart worries me."

"Always? Huh," Chimney muttered, then fell silent. The player character Chimney before my eyes was looking right at me, but I got the feeling that the real person sitting at his computer was not.

•hack // Another Birth

"Did I say something wrong?" I asked.

"Nah, don't sweat it," he said. "I'm gonna go eat. See you again later, okay?" He logged out, disappearing.

I didn't know what to think. There was apparently quite a rift between the two of them. What had pushed them so far apart? If I found out, maybe there would be something I could do.

>What're you up to?

I Flash Mailed Nova, and after a while a reply came back.

>>Just killing time.

>Can you talk for a little while?

>>Huh? You're done already?

>We took a break.

>>Fine. I'm still in the same spot.

>I'm on my way.

Since he was still there, I immediately headed for Dun Loireag and found him gazing at the scenery exactly where I'd left him.

"Nova!"

"What do you want to talk about?" he asked in a bored voice, getting right to the point.

"About Chimney," I said.

"Oh," Nova said. "Then there's nothing to say."

He fell silent after that, so I spoke up. I wasn't sure if it was the right thing to do or not, but either way, I couldn't just say nothing. "He was doing well on his own."

That got a reaction out of him. "At what?"

"Showing a newbie the ropes."

"Chimney? By himself?" His voice unexpectedly rose.

"Well, I was with them too," I said.

"Hmm . . . So that's what you got called off for." Nova smiled. "Well, do what you have to do." His tone of voice turned uninterested again.

"What're you—" I began, trying to get through to him, but Nova lifted a hand to stop me.

"Until he understands, I don't care to go anywhere near him," Nova said, then stood up and walked away.

Not knowing what else I could possibly do, I just kept quiet and watched him walk away, his words echoing in my mind. *Until he understands . . . What the hell does he want Chimney to understand?* If only I knew that, I'd have something to work with . . .

Before long, a Flash Mail arrived from Chimney announcing that he was back, so I returned to Mac•Anu. "Hi!" I called out, spying him and Tarou.

"There you are!" Chimney said. "So, shall we get going?"

"I found an assortment of keywords on the BBS," Tarou said. "Now we can go lots of places!"

"You got it!" Chimney said. As we prompted him, Tarou chose keywords at the Chaos Gate.

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Behind him, I spoke to Chimney. "Hey, Chimney . . ."

"Hmm?"

"What happened with Nova?"

He paused before answering. "I'm fine even if he's not around. Do I look that pathetic to you?"

Ouch! "Uh-uh . . . That's not what I meant," I said.

The transfer kicked in, so our conversation was cut short.

We spent the rest of the evening going around to whatever areas the keywords Tarou had gotten his hands on led to, making easy trips through dungeons and raiding the Gott Statues. I watched Chimney and Tarou enjoying themselves getting hit by whatever the traps on the treasure chests did, and felt an odd malaise. While we'd been teaching Tarou the basics I hadn't given it much thought, but now that we were adventuring like normal, it was amazing to me just how *wrong* and unnatural it felt for Nova not to be at Chimney's side.

When it was time for Tarou to go, we agreed to meet up again the next day and disbanded the party. I decided to try talking to Nova again, if he was still around. Fortunately, he was in Mac•Anu. After I apologized for bothering him so many times, I asked, "What was . . . the cause of your fight?"

"Did Chimney say we were fighting?" Nova asked gruffly.

"No. I can tell just by looking."

He sighed. "You're right about that," Nova murmured apologetically.

"What'd you fight about?"

"This," he said, pointing at the ground next to his feet.

Hub?

"We fought about The World," Nova admitted. "There are all kinds of rumors going around about this game being dangerous, right? So . . . I guess I thought we should go ahead and distance ourselves from it."

The moment he said that, all the things I was going to say about reconciliation and not fighting dried up.

The BBS was overflowing with rumors, some that were way off like that hackers were passing around a "visual drug" that put you in a coma if you saw it, and others that were pretty much true like that there were unbeatable monsters that would leave you comatose if you didn't run away in time. And even disregarding the rumors, there were obvious things like the system disorders and the broken graphics that were popping up throughout The World . . . It was only natural for Nova to want to distance himself.

"Chimney's the type of guy who likes sticking his nose in dangerous situations," Nova said. "No matter how much I warn him, he just doesn't get it."

"That does sound like Chimney," I admitted.

"Doesn't it?" Nova said. "It's not exactly like I said we should quit this game. I just want to avoid dangerous places, but he doesn't get it."

"What if you tried talking to him again?"

"What would be the point? The way things are, we'd just end up fighting again."

"That's true, but . . ." It still just felt wrong, the two of them not together. *But is it selfish of me to think that?*

"People play games . . . 'cause they're fun, right?" Nova said. "But playing while you live in fear of what a bunch of nasty rumors say isn't that great . . . Ugh, am I overanalyzing this?"

I shook my head. "No, I don't think you are." I understood the thrill of flirting with danger, but as someone who was keenly aware of the facts, I thought it seemed like an extremely perilous course of action.

"I have a feeling that Chimney will eventually meet up with one of those rumored monsters," Nova said in a low voice.

I agreed. The contamination of The World was spreading daily. Even if you didn't go in search of Data Bugs, there was a good chance you'd encounter one someday. And if you *did* go chasing after them . . .

Nova continued. "I think to myself that I couldn't bear for that to happen when I wasn't around, but . . . I'm afraid for myself."

I understood that fear, and I understood the desire to flee.

"I'm so pathetic," Nova muttered, and I just stayed quiet. It felt like if I opened my mouth the whole truth would just come spilling out, so I didn't say anything at all.



After I logged out, I looked at the family photo next to the computer. If only I hadn't chosen those keywords that fateful day, my brother would still be able to smile like he did in that picture.

"I'm sorry, Fumikazu," I said, running my fingers over the edge of the frame, then crawled into bed.



>>Yooohoo! Here we go again today. O_O

When I logged in the next day, I got Chimney's Flash Mail.

>You said it.

>>I'm with Tarou at the item shop. What about you?

>I'm heading over there now, then.

I have a feeling that Chimney will eventually meet up with one of those rumored monsters . . . Nova's words echoed in my mind. I shook my head to fight off my anxiety as I walked to the item shop. *I can't be fainthearted. If something does happen, since I'm the experienced one, it'll be up to me to handle it.*

Once I met up with them, we immediately formed a party.

"Shall we go to Δ: Bottomless, Fated, Judgment today?" Tarou proposed.

"Sure thing!" Chimney said, so we walked to the Chaos Gate and warped there.

Once we got to the field, Tarou drew in a sharp breath. "Huh?!"

The scene spread out before us was a far cry from any of the areas we'd visited with him so far. The sky was riddled with large

.hack // Another Birth

fissures littered with glowing, green progressions. Scorch marks were scattered across the ground at our feet, and within them yellow strings of text were visible. This field had once been a desert, but it had now taken on an atrocious appearance.

"This is amazing!" Tarou said. "Don't you think we should find good items here?"

I couldn't believe my ears. "Huh?"

"This field is totally different from the ones we went to before!" Tarou said, nodding to himself. "Of course there will be good items."

"You're an interesting one, Tarou," Chimney said nonchalantly, but I certainly couldn't bring myself to agree.

"Why is that?" Tarou asked Chimney.

"The graphics look like that because they're broken in this area," Chimney said. "Oh well. I don't feel like going back." He smiled.

I've got a bad feeling about this . . . "Can't we go somewhere else?" I asked anxiously.

Chimney answered like nothing was going on. "It's just broken graphics. There's no need to go anywhere else."

"But . . ."

"If you go to the server above this, fields like this are all over the place there, so what's there to worry about?"

I wasn't sure myself. I hadn't been to Delta server in so long, I didn't know what the state of the contamination was here.

"Anyway, let's go!" Chimney called, and took off running. Even as I kept quiet and internalized my anxiety, I jogged after

him through the contaminated field. We tripped portals and fought monsters like normal, and then Chimney pointed to a hill. "Is that one over there the last portal?"

"Let's go!" Tarou said. He readied his twin blades and approached the glowing sphere. The instant it was triggered, my eyes opened wide at what emerged.

"There it is!" Chimney cried out excitedly, running up to the monster before Tarou could even cut into it.

With a skull in its right hand and a sword in its left, the headless monster before us . . . was clad in shiny green hexes. Its name was an illegible scrambled string. There was no question about it—it a Data Bug.

"Run!" I yelled, still some distance away.

Tarou came over to where I was and asked curiously, "Why?"

"That's one of the monsters from the rumors!"

"The monster that does not lose hit points?"

"Right!"

Tarou considered. "But Chimney—"

As Tarou hesitated, Chimney called out happily, "I finally found one!"

"Chimney!" I cried, but he paid me no heed and cut into the monster. "I said we should run!" I yelled at him. "That's the monster the rumors are about!"

Chimney grinned. "And I've finally found it! Wouldn't it be a shame not to give it a go?" He hacked at it some more with his blade.

I obviously wasn't getting through to him.

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What should I do? I can't win against this thing . . . I had to move, to do something, but I was paralyzed at that thought.

Chimney's level must have been pretty high by then, but normal attacks from even high-level characters had almost no effect on Data Bugs. Chimney's hit points decreased every time he was attacked, but the Data Bug's hit points meter was showing no sign of change. At this rate, it was obvious he would lose.

"Tarou," I said, "go back to town now."

"Huh?"

"Get out of here," I ordered him. "There's something I have to do here."

"But you might fall into a coma if you lose, right?"

"I just have to not lose," I said grimly.

Beside me, Tarou readied his twin blades. "I will fight too!"

Uh-oh. "Tarou, at your low level, there's no way you can dent that thing. And you don't even have the magic to act as support."

"But . . ."

"You'll just get in the way! So go back to town. *Now.*" I wasn't able to look him in the face as I said that. I only meant to keep him from being injured, but I knew my words hurt him.

Tarou backed away, then turned and ran, warping back to town. Once I made sure he was gone, I joined in the attack on the Data Bug, keeping an eye on the status of Chimney's hit points. There was no way we could beat it, but I had a lot of recovery items—I could prolong our lives for quite a while. All I had to do was persuade Chimney to escape before the items ran out.

At my side, Chimney unleashed attack skill after attack skill. "Hayabusa!" But the Data Bug received no damage at all.

"Chimney, I said we should run!" I yelled.

"I've got a lot left in me yet!" Chimney said. "But thanks for the backup!"

"I'm not backing you up so you can fight!" I cried. "It's so you can escape with your life!"

The Data Bug swung its sword, sending both Chimney and me to the brink of death. I hurriedly used recovery items, but they were disappearing like I was throwing them away.

"Close one! Thanks for the recovery!" Chimney grinned, and renewed his attack.

"Chimney! We might fall into comas!"

"We might, but we might not!" he called back.

Maybe it's pointless no matter what I say . . . My spirits were completely crushed, and just when Chimney's hit points were about to drop to nothing—the Data Bug's sword slashed down at him and completed the job. His hit point meter read a big, fat zero, and his character lost all color and stopped moving.

You're kidding me! I stood there, dumbfounded, until the Data Bug's sword stabbed at me mercilessly. Somehow I withstood the attack, operating the controller with shaking hands. *I'm supposed to have a Resurrect here somewhere . . .* I laid all my hopes on the item for reviving a single player character, and used it on Chimney. With no time to even see if it had worked, I set about recovering my own hit points.

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"What's with this thing?" I heard Chimney say, and turned back to him. His stats had completely recovered.

You don't go comatose if someone in the party is still alive? I couldn't explain what was going on, but we still had no way to win.

Desperate now, Chimney attacked the Data Bug more fiercely than ever.

"I said it's dangerous!" I yelled again, trying to interpose myself. But before I could get there, a familiar Blademaster cut in between him and the monster with a shout.

And it felt like time began to pass very slowly. Chimney stared blankly at the newcomer, then lowered his sword.

"Nova? What're you doing here?"

"Never mind!" Nova said. "Just run!"

"Why?"

"Are you stupid or something?" Nova said, striking at the monster. "This thing isn't losing any hit points!" But even then, Chimney did not move. "If you're defeated, you'll end up in a coma!"

Chimney shrugged and started whacking away with his sword. "It got me once, but I'm fine!"

"Stop messing around and get the hell out of here!" Nova yelled, still fighting.

"But . . ."

"If we're all defeated, we might end up in comas," I whispered.

"What?"

Like when my brother was defeated, he was alone.

My doubt was nearing conviction. "Let's run away! Now!"

Chimney grinned. "It's just a rumor." He took a few more jabs.

Something snapped inside me. Forgetting to use any recovery items on Nova and Chimney, I whispered, "It's no rumor." That was something I knew better than anyone, and the last thing I wanted was for them to end up like Fumikazu.

"Hmm?"

"It's not a freaking rumor!"

At my hysterical yell, Chimney and Nova froze and looked at me.

"That's why we should run!" I shouted, and without going into any detail, I backed well away from the battle.

"O-okay," Chimney said hesitantly, and in that instant, the Data Bug's sword swung down upon him.

Oh no!

There was no way I could get there in time to block . . . but Nova's sword flashed up to parry, as he put himself between Chimney and the monster. "Hurry! Run!" he cried.

Chimney backpedaled at last and sheathed his weapon. However, Nova made no move to escape.

"But what about you?" Chimney called to him.

"I'll be along soon," he said, trading a few more blows with the monster.

I shook my head forcefully. If we were running, we should *all* run. "I can't leave you here!" I yelled.

"Chimney, do like we always do," Nova ordered.

"G-got it," Chimney said, and warped out.

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And since I was in the same party as him, I was gated back as well by force. "Nooo!" I cried, trying to shake off the warp rings as they coiled around my character. But no matter what frantic movements I made on my controller, they amounted to nothing. The image of the Data Bug and Nova battling it out vanished from before my eyes.



"Why did you leave Nova behind?!" I yelled at Chimney as we arrived back in town. He didn't respond. "You knew you were leaving him in danger! How could you do that?"

"Because he'll be all right."

I couldn't look him in the eye. Staring down at the ground with the Chaos Gate at my back, I whispered, "I have to go help him . . ."

But the second I turned around, I bumped into a familiar blue suit of armor. "I knew he'd be all right," Chimney said, smiling.

"Nova! How'd you get away?" I was so happy that he was safe, I got all bleary-eyed.

"Nova's good at getting away," Chimney chirped, like he'd forgotten how close he'd just come to death. "Whenever we flee back to town, he acts as a decoy."

"You understand though, right?" I said slowly. "He was in danger."

Chimney shrugged. "I understood we couldn't win."

Nova poked him in the head. "You idiot!" he said, and the smiles overflowing on their faces reflected my own relief and happiness.



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"Wait here a moment," Chimney said. "I'm going to go apologize to Tarou." He disappeared into town.

Behind me as I watched him go, Nova asked in a quiet voice, "Hey, how come you sounded like you were so sure about what you said back there?"

"What do you mean?" I said guardedly.

"I've been giving this a great deal of thought, myself," Nova said. "About why sweet little BlackRose knows irregular player characters."

"There's no reason," I said.

"If you were playing regularly," Nova said, "there would be no reason."

"You think?" *How can I avoid this topic?*

Nova put a hand on my shoulder. "I'd say you're in The World for a different reason than we are."

Heat built up in my chest, and I couldn't find any words.

"Wouldn't a normal person run from a monster that couldn't be beat?" Nova said. "No one would have blamed you if you had."

"If you put it that way," I said, "wouldn't a normal person not have come to help? Oh—how did you get there, anyway?"

Nova rubbed the back of his neck. "Ah, I caught sight of you three earlier. And then just when I was thinking about striking out on my own, that white-haired guy who was with you showed up at the Chaos Gate alone. I thought that was odd, so I asked him what was going on, and he said there was a weird monster."

"A normal person wouldn't have come just for that," I said.

He shrugged and smiled. "I was confident I could get away."

thank_you_friends

"But think about what wouldn't happened if you didn't," I prodded.

"That's true," he said. "Sorry to worry you."

I looked away. "Yeah."

"About before—I won't dig any deeper," Nova said. "You must have your reasons. It's just that I think of you as a pal, so I don't want you doing anything crazy."

"Yeah," I said, his words piercing my heart. "S-sorry."

"Whoa! Don't cry," Nova said, waving his hands. "Ugh, it's like I'm a bad guy or something."

"No, no," I assured him. "Sorry for keeping quiet for so long."

"For so long? Sure, as if you're not going to keep quiet from here on, too." Nova jabbed me in the shoulder with a finger. "I'm just amazed I noticed it."

"What do you mean?"

"Let's just call it insight," Nova said, and smiled. I was dying to ask just how much he had noticed, but his lighthearted mood dissuaded me. I was just thankful that he wasn't going to ask any pointed questions.

At that point, one of the irregular player characters Nova was talking about—a Twin Blade whose clothes were a shade of red normally impossible to select—waved to me from across the square. "BlackRose! Is now a good time?"

I looked to Nova.

"You go on," he said. "I'll deal with Chimney from now on."

"Sure . . ."

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"I might not be of any use in what you're doing," Nova told me, "but if you ever want to just play normally then call me anytime—though, I might not be here." He smiled.

"Thanks," I told him sincerely. "I'll be going then," I said, bidding farewell to the first friend I had met online. Promising myself that someday The World would be safe for us to go adventuring in again, I headed to where the comrades with whom I shared a common purpose awaited me.

To be continued . . .

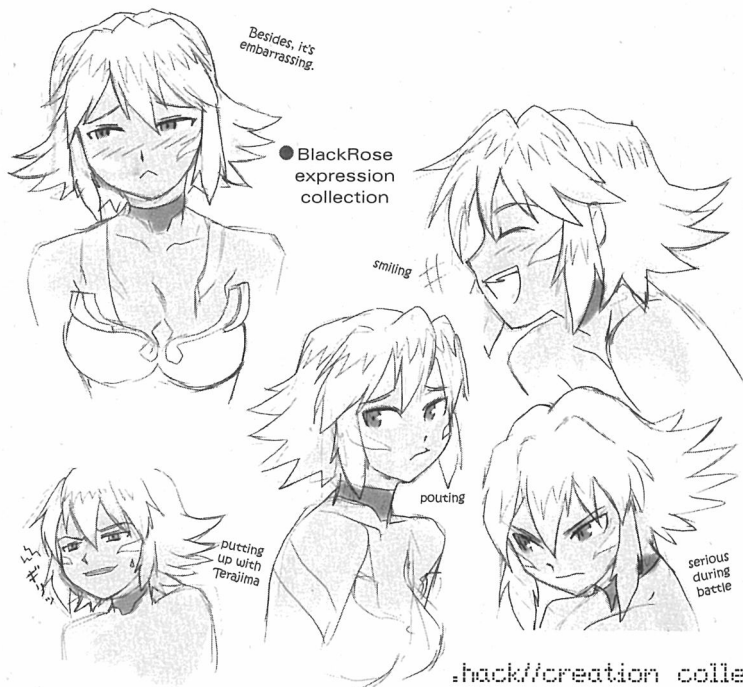
Art File ●

•hack // Another Birth

Hello again after so long, everyone. This is Waka from CyberConnect2. I oversee the illustrations. Continuing the pattern set in the first two volumes, welcome to the third installment of our little art corner. I'll be your host once again, so thank you for coming!

Now then, there was a great amount of plot movement in volume 3. Balmung joined the good guys, Mia started behaving strangely, and some characters underwent dramatic changes in the way they think.

This time, especially in the game, BlackRose showed us a lot of comical expressions, and I personally had a lot of fun drawing them. BlackRose and Akira are both easily moved by emotion, and every time it happens, it makes me think what a charming personality she has. I constantly strive to convey that charm to all of you! It's really quite a difficult undertaking.

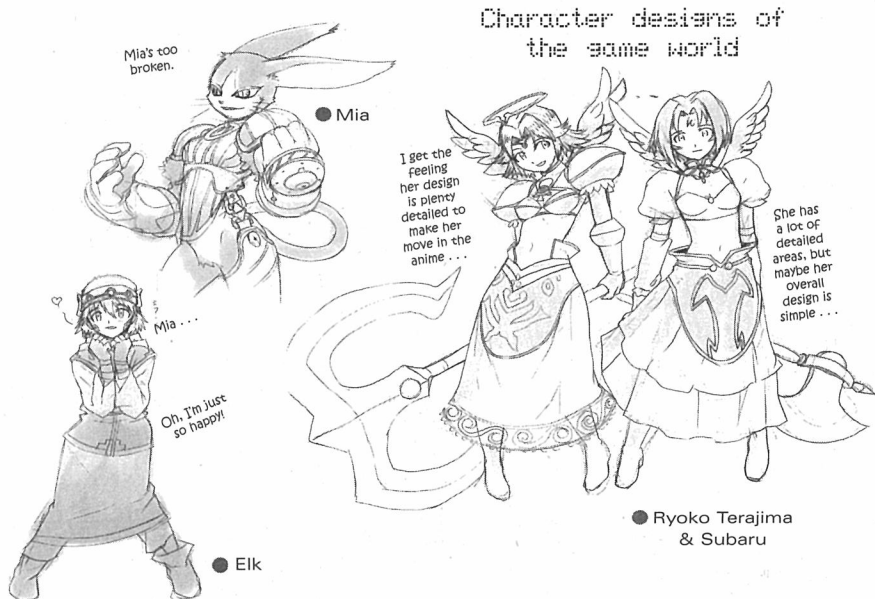


.hack//creation collection
Designer's comments!

I worked as a graphic designer on the .hack series of games, but with a game there is a limited amount of expressions you can use, according to certain general patterns, due to the sheer volume of work required. However, with book illustrations you have to express fine nuances of emotion, so the work that goes into it is difficult on a different level from that of the games.

Speaking of games, as you know, the characters in the .hack series were designed by Yoshiyuki Sadamoto, but the images in the games are 3-D computer graphics. With CGI, you complete a single 3-D model and then move it around like a puppet to do your animation. It's not like TV animation where you draw each frame separately by hand. For that reason, the characters in the .hack series are designed with even more attention paid to detail than with TV anime characters. However, because afterwards the game characters also appeared in the anime, I think the animation staff had a hard time of it. (Especially with Balmung . . .)

Drawing them for the illustrations is also quite difficult, so I'm constantly checking the designs while I'm drawing. (There are occasionally small differences, but that'll just be our little secret, okay?)



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Speaking of the anime, I think some of you might be aware that the design for Ryoko Terajima, who was introduced in this volume, is the basis for the design of Subaru from the *.hack//SIGN* anime. The sexy feel of her exposed midriff has evolved somewhat on Subaru, though. (laughs)

Now we move to characters who originated in the novels. In this volume (which appeared in *The Sneaker*), the original character Tarou appeared. He might very well not appear again (laughs), but wild ideas of him making an interesting party member with Nova and Chimney come to mind.



● Tarou creation

It seems like Tarou would make a good combo with Nova and Chimney.



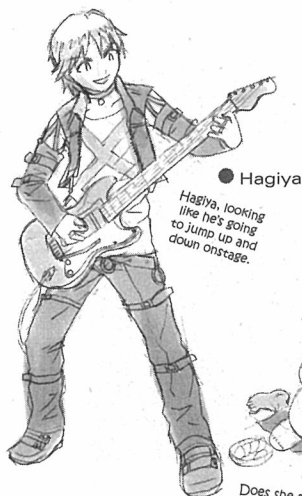
● Chimney & Tarou



We had many chances in this volume to introduce Akira and other real-world characters wearing street clothes, but Akira seems to spend her time around the house wearing T-shirts or sweats, so she must be an active, athletic girl who doesn't pay much attention to fashion. For that reason I didn't give too much thought to her design, but then again I'm not into fashion myself, so it didn't help that I didn't have any good ideas along those lines in the first place. However, Western-style clothing sense shows one's personality, so if I drew her with too wild a design, it would cause problems. That's one of the difficulties involved.

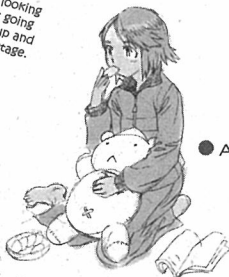
Asaoka has a serious, quiet personality, so her clothing probably has a down-to-earth feel. If she were to wear gothic Lolita or the Pink House line, wouldn't that throw a whole new light on her character?

Hagiya is in a band, so with that in mind, if he were to dress in a punk style or like a flirt, you'd wonder if he was really a nasty guy. (It was fun to imagine, though, so I tried drawing it.)



● Hagiya

Hagiya, looking like he's going to jump up and down onstage.



● Asaoka

Does she spend her time at home wearing a sweat suit like this one?

Akira does not seem to pay attention to fashion ...



Asaoka has a high-class feel about her, so there's nothing about this that doesn't suit her ... yet it is odd, isn't it?



● Akira creation

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For Believers...

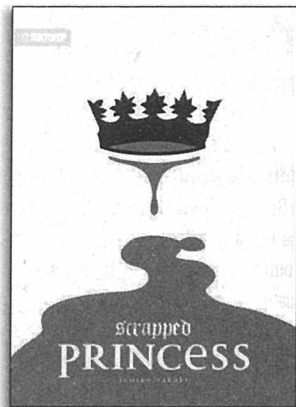
Scrapped Princess:

A Tale of Destiny

By Ichiro Sakaki

A dark prophecy reveals that the queen will give birth to a daughter who will usher in the Apocalypse. But despite all attempts to destroy the baby, the myth of the "Scrapped Princess" lingers on...

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For Thinkers...

Kino no Tabi:

Book One of The Beautiful World

By Keiichi Sigasawa

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STORIES THAT ARE ECLECTIC, OFF-CENTER, UNEXPECTED AND UNFORGETTABLE...

For Adventurers...

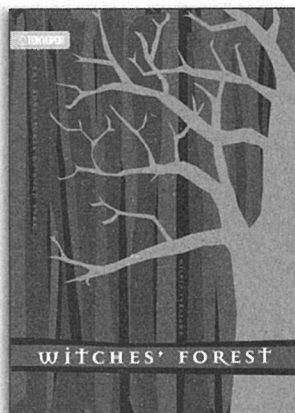
Witches' Forest:

The Adventures of Duan Surk

By Mishio Fukazawa

Duan Surk is a 16-year-old Level 2 fighter who embarks on the quest of a lifetime—battling mythical creatures and outwitting evil sorceresses, all in an impossible rescue mission in the spooky Witches' Forest!

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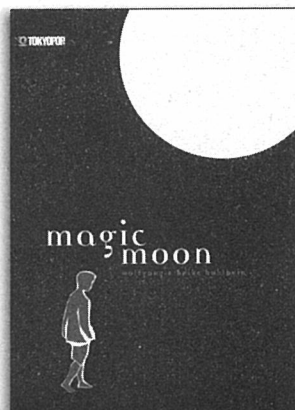
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